UNIVERSITY of TASMANIA

Perceptions, Perspectives and Practice: Identifying and Supporting Young Adolescent Academic Underachievers in the Year 7 and 8 Classroom.

By

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Declaration of Originality

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The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator, and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved children, Ainslie, Felicity and Alistair, to their kind and thoughtful partners, to my beautiful granddaughter Isabella, and to the students and teachers who participated in the study.

Children come into the world as expert learners. Our essential work as teachers is to be a bridge of connection between the constructed learning environment (of academia) and the natural one. We need to ensure that we encourage, enhance and extend this natural gift of our young learners in the classroom, relying on our own belief in their innate potential and ability to learn.

Acknowledgments

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GLOSSARY

Included below is a list of some of the major terms and acronyms used throughout the study. The list includes definitions of key terms used in the study. These terms are revisited, discussed, and clarified in further detail in Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.

Academic Underachievement

For the purposes of this study, underachievement refers specifically to academic underachievement. Academic underachievement is an operational definition that describes a specific phenomenon. It describes the achievement of students whose results in the classroom, as measured by grades, tests and assessment of academic skills and abilities, are lower than the predicted ability or expectations made by teachers, school support personnel and parents, or results predicted from achievement on standardised tests and assessments (Griffin, 1988; McCall, 1994; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Thus, within this study, the term 'underachievement' is regarded as 'academic underachievement', which while it might be instigated by a wide range of events or causes, is a concern that is demonstrated predominantly by the student's formal results and learning outcomes. Additionally, as Krause and Krause (1981) noted, a significant factor in the identification of academic underachievement needs to be consistency, that is, academic underachievement must occur over an extended time-frame and under a range of conditions. Academic underachievement and its complexities are explored more fully within the study specifically in Chapter 2: Sections 2.2-2.8. It needs to be noted that while more recent studies have discussed, debated and outlined variations and

models of underachievement and academic underachievement, the classic definition by McCall (1994) is widely accepted, with Reis and McCoach's (2000) more recently updated operational definition presenting a similar concept.

ACARA

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum

AITSL

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

http://www.aitsl.edu.au

Disengagement

Disengagement can be viewed as a complex and many-faceted construct underpinned by a wide range of behaviours, relationships and attitudes demonstrated by students across a range of fields and activities, including emotional, behavioural and cognitive aspects (Attard, 2011; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Thomas, 2013). Students who are disengaged learners may demonstrate irregular attendance, be reluctant to participate in classroom learning, complete homework or assessment and may also show increased tendencies to demonstrate disruptive or off task behaviours while at school (Slee, 2014; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

IEP

Independent Education Plan

http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/health/Pages/oohcedplans.aspx

LBOTE

Language backgrounds other than English

http://www.dec.nsw.gov.au/detresources/about-us/statistics-and-research/key-statistics-and-reports/students_lbote.pdf

MCEETYA

Ministerial Department on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs

http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf

Middle Years Education

Middle Years Education refers to a period generally understood to include young adolescents and pre-adolescents: students aged from 10 to 15 years, or Years' 5-8 or 5-9 in formal school systems (Pendergast, 2010).

NAPLAN

National Assessment Program- Literacy and Numeracy

https://www.nap.edu.au

OECD

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

http://www.oecd.org

PAT

Progressive Achievement Test

https://www.acer.org/pat/tests/reading

PLP

Personalised Learning and Support Plan

https://education.nsw.gov.au/disability-learning-and-support/personalised-support-for-learning/personalised-learning-And-support

Perceptions

The term 'perceptions' as it is used within this study refers to teacher observations regarding young adolescent learning and behaviour in the classroom setting. The Sage Dictionary of Sociology (Bruce & Yearley, 2006) notes that perceptions can be shaped and informed by prior experiences. In the interests of clarity, a distinction has been between the term 'perceptions', which, in this study, refers to participant observations (Perception, 2017) and 'perspectives', which denotes participant beliefs, assumptions and points of view. Teacher perceptions are also used as a major theme in the study to assist with clarifying and organising key findings in the data and are discussed and elaborated on further within this study as required.

Perspectives

The term 'perspectives' emerges as another key theme used to organise and clarify findings within the data sets. Within this study this term describes individual teacher point-of-view or frame of reference (Perspective, 2017). Teachers' perspectives encompass a combination of their perceptions, beliefs and values, including their attitudes and positions regarding academic underachievement and the influence and impact of academic underachievement on young adolescents in the classroom setting.

Practice

The term practice encompasses the range of strategies, actions and processes used by teachers in the classroom setting. Practice implies a professional set of skills and actions (Practice, 2017), undertaken or exercised by teachers in their professional

capacity. Teacher practices include the actions they take, the pedagogies and processes they utilise, the different things they do in the classroom. These practices may also be informed and influenced by teacher perceptions, and their perspectives as informed by their professional knowledge and understanding.

TCEO

Tasmanian Catholic Education Office

http://catholic.tas.edu.au

Young Adolescence

Young or early adolescence is commonly defined as a period in a young person's life, approximately between the ages of 11 to 14 (Bahr, 2010; Santrock, 2008; Smyth & McInerney, 2007) or 10-15 years (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Pendergast & Danby, 2011). In Australian schools and systems this period may include Year 7 to 9, with students in these year groups generally being between the ages of 11 to 15 years. These years are predominantly where students are undergoing puberty and profound physiological changes; they may also be experiencing significant social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and psychological changes (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Santrock, 2008; Sejnost, 2009

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Abstract

This thesis investigated ways that teachers of young adolescents identify and support academic underachievers in the classroom setting. The study commenced with a comprehensive survey of the relevant literature. It considered key issues relating to academic achievement in the first years of secondary school and discussed concerns for students, teachers, and teacher practice. The study then presented a focused look at concepts underpinning academic underachievement in Year 7 and 8, including disengagement, young adolescence and middle years' education models. The study supported claims in the literature that these concepts describe complex and multi-faceted constructs which are often used in diverse ways by different groups in education. Three primary research questions underpinned the structure of the study:

What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?

What factors do young adolescents identify as significant to their learning?

and

What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?

The study was based on a constructionist-interpretive paradigm, utilising a mixed methodological approach situated within a collective case study design. The research site, setting and study sample were located within regional Australia. Three different data sets were collected including a questionnaire completed by 34 teachers of students in Year 7 and 8, a survey given to a cohort of 178 Year 7 students from a regional Catholic College and interviews conducted with 12

teachers. Data gathered was predominantly qualitative with some attention given to quantitative data collection methods. Primary data processing techniques included latent thematic analysis techniques and descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that teachers primarily considered four criteria when identifying academic underachievers, predominantly using Australian and Tasmanian Curriculum standards as a benchmark for measuring achievement. Teachers also considered a range of background factors when identifying students. Findings from the student cohort surveyed indicated that many of the students were aware of, and concerned about, meeting 'the standard' as a benchmark in Year 7. Findings from both teachers and students indicated concerns with barriers and challenges to achievement including time constraints, connecting to and participating in classroom learning and learner confidence. Teachers advocated differing practices to address underachievement, supporting the findings from the literature in the field. However, findings indicated that teachers' practice was influenced by their perceptions and perspectives regarding the students they identified as academic underachievers in their classrooms. Teacher practices employed tended to be remedial and did not appear to be influenced by middle years' educational models, constructivist or learner-centered curriculum or other learning theories. Teachers recognised that young adolescent academic underachievers often had complex needs, nevertheless the practices used by teacher participants to address academic underachievement might foster the development of self-limiting beliefs in students identified as academic underachievers.

Chapter 1: Introduction

What on earth would make someone a non-learner? Everyone is born with an intense drive to learn. Infants stretch their skills daily. Not just ordinary skills, but the most difficult tasks of a lifetime, like learning to walk and talk. They never decide it's too hard or not worth the effort (Dweck, 2006, p 16).

1.1 Introduction to the Study

Many students attending the first two years of secondary school have persistent records of low levels of attainment for their age and grade level (Dinham & Rowe, 2007). Despite a range of papers, policies, programs and reforms being introduced to enhance the education of adolescents in Australian schools (Department of Education and Training, ACT, 2005; Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2016), academic underachievement has remained a concern for teachers, parents and administrators alike (Hattie, 2012). This study has focused on investigating the factors and characteristics that teachers consider significant when identifying adolescent academic underachievers in the classroom setting. Additionally, the study has sought to clarify student perceptions on learning and teacher practice used to address academic underachievement.

This chapter provides an introduction and overview to the study, contextualising background factors and key points for the reader. The chapter begins with a short introductory statement that outlines the main thrust of the topic before providing a background context for the reader. The statement of the problem and main definitions and terms are outlined. The chapter then presents the study claim and purpose, research questions and a summary of methodologies

used, outlining the interpretive constructionist paradigm, which underpins the study topic and methodology. The reader is then provided with an outline of the remaining chapters within the study and a summary of the study topic and chapter.

1.2 Background to the Study

The role of the classroom teacher in schools in Australia is one that is complex, multi-faceted and demanding physically, emotionally and intellectually. Australian schoolteachers work with a wide range of learners with diverse backgrounds, abilities and learning styles. They are required to teach inclusively, adapt the curriculum and develop pedagogies to meet the needs of their students as well as to be responsive to changes in policy, school and system, crafting their practices to reflect these changes and mandates (Louden et al., 2000). This context applies to most teachers, classrooms and learners in Australian schools, but it is especially pertinent when considering the needs of young adolescents. Year 7[1] and 8 are the years when students begin and consolidate their transition from primary to secondary schooling in Australian schools. The age of students moving from primary to secondary school generally includes students aged from 11-13 years. This is an age that encompasses the developmental stage of young adolescence (Bahr, 2010; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Santrock, 2008), due to the onset or progression of puberty, and the range of cognitive, social and emotional developments that the large majority of students undergo during this time. The move from primary to secondary school occurs at a time when students experience

[1] Throughout this study the use of 'Year' rather than 'Grade' has been used to denote student cohorts and grade or year levels, in accordance with the convention used by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority or ACARA.

significant changes biologically and socially (Bahr, 2010; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Cobbold, 2005).

Research has confirmed that students accrue additional educational challenges during their transition from childhood into young adolescence, (Elsworth, Kleinhenz, & Beavis, 2004) and into the different structures and demands of secondary school (Department of Education &Training, ACT, 2005). Such challenges include adapting from interaction with one or perhaps two teachers daily within the same classroom, to learning to work with multiple teachers, moving between rooms several times a day and following a highly structured schedule which includes managing a wide range of resources and equipment that students need to take personal responsibility for. Students receive homework and assessment tasks from different teachers concurrently and are expected to learn to manage this new workload as part of their adjustment (Ministerial Department of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs hereafter MCEETYA, 2008). Students also need to learn the various discourses and vocabularies that accompany the disciplines, knowledge and learning that form part of the secondary school curricula (Garrick & Keogh, 2010). Students will have come from primary schools, which often foster leadership skills amongst the older students, encourage student mentoring and knowledge sharing, and cultivate a high degree of autonomy and independence within their Grade 6 cohorts. These students then become the most junior and, potentially the most vulnerable cohort within the secondary school (Bergin & Bergin, 2012; Fuller, 1998), entering this new and complex environment at a time when they are also going through pronounced physiological changes through puberty (Bahr, 2010).

While the move can be a challenge, many secondary schools have established processes to support this transition (Evangelou et al., 2008; Towns, 2011). Successful transition programs within schools often include specific events and activities for students and parents, including open days, information provided to parents and students about administrative processes, academic expectations, early visits and orientation days (Evangelou et al., 2008).

1.3 The Classroom Teacher's Perspective

From the teacher's perspective, teaching young adolescents in these year levels may also come with specific challenges. These include teaching large groups of students who are seen infrequently, who may have varying levels of ability and a disparate range of needs. Teachers also need to establish pedagogical relationships and connections across different year levels and subjects (Croswell, Bahr, Pendergast, & Newhouse-Maiden, 2005). While teachers may acknowledge and attempt to instigate effective practice when teaching students entering secondary school, system organisational processes, school operational procedures and competing demands can add to teachers' challenges in the classroom (Croswell et al., 2005). Furthermore, teacher knowledge and understandings may be informed by differing perceptions and perspectives and vary considerably. Thus, teachers' identification and reactions to academic underachievement in their students may result in practices that vary in their effectiveness in addressing these concerns (Hattie, 2012; Rumble & Aspland, 2010).

1.4 Who is the Academic Underachiever?

The definition of underachievement or the underachieving student is a complex term. Although research has certainly engaged in defining and exploring the term 'underachiever', often this label is explored as a subsidiary aspect of another educational field or problem that might focus on student disengagement, student gender or literacy and numeracy deficits and outcomes. Underachieving students form a disparate group, and may include clusters of diverse students from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. Underachieving students might be gifted and talented, Second Language speakers, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students with low literacy and numeracy skills, Indigenous students or students with learning barriers (Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Louden et al., 2000; Luke et al., 2003). Underachievement comprises a significant component of the literature on the gifted and talented student (Van Tassel-Baska, 2005), although here the underachievement may be specifically related to high achievement as gifted and talented underachievers may still be meeting year-level benchmarks and learning outcomes in the classroom.

Academic underachievers may include students who are disengaged or in the process of disengaging from school (Thomas, 2013), and students labelled 'at risk' for a variety of reasons, including reasons of gender, wellbeing, social-economic, or language barriers (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003). Young male academic underachievers comprise another group of students who have been the topic of national and international debate and research (Jha & Kelleher, 2006). Student groups showing underachievement may include those students with learning disabilities and difficulties (Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Louden et al., 2000), although

others, such as Reis and McCoach (2000) have excluded students with diagnosed learning disabilities from their operational definition.

Consequently, students from any of the groups above may be identified as 'academic underachievers', in addition to their identification as a student from a minority, 'at risk' or 'disadvantaged' education group. Academic underachievement may also form a factor in various targeted educational programs implemented to address the needs of one or other of the minority groups listed. Thus, 'academic underachievement' both as a research term or concept and as an actual phenomenon within the classroom may be amorphous, disparate and relatively subjectively interpreted within systems, schools and teachers. Academic underachievement may present many different facets and types of underachievement. Often simply referred to as 'underachievement' the term can be used broadly and is open to a range of interpretations and agendas (Chukwu-Etu, 2009; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Carr, Borkowski and Maxwell, (1991), noted that underachievement in the US had been a persistent problem for decades, under-researched "despite its prevalence and significance for …(the) future workforce" (p. 108). The authors concluded that this might be because "underachievers are often under-identified and do not represent the most pressing problem facing classroom teachers" (p. 108).

The definition of academic underachievement is complex and multi-layered (Figg, Rogers, McCormick, & Low, 2012; Krause & Krause, 1981; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Distinguishing between academic underachievers and disengaged students is not always easily discerned due to the complex and ambiguous factors that

underpin these layered terms. There are multiple factors accompanying academic underachievement that complicate its ready identification by teachers and professionals (Chukwu-Etu, 2009; Figg et al., 2012; Reis & McCoach, 2000). This is discussed in greater depth within Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.

1.5 Statement of the Problem

The early years of secondary schooling are years where research has highlighted decreased levels of achievement and plateauing of learning outcomes occurring particularly amongst Year 7 and 8 students (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Pendergast, 2016). Teachers report more incidents of disruptive behaviour (De Jong, 2010). There are noted disconnections from learning in the classroom and increased occurrences of depression, anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders (Laurence et al., 2015), increased bullying, cyberbullying (Lacey, Cornell, & Konald, 2017; Nilan, Burgess, Hobbs, Threadgold, & Alexander, 2015) and other wellbeing concerns (Chadbourne, 2001), all of which may impact on student academic achievement. School change and transitions from primary to secondary school may increase the vulnerability and susceptibility of young adolescents to risky and negative trends of behaviour (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Fuller, 1998). For some students, failure to adapt to secondary school learning and to achieve positive results during these formative years can have a persistent negative influence that stretches beyond secondary school (Abbott-Chapman, 2015; Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Stuart, 1989). These influences can potentially impact on the young adolescents' long-term outcomes and life choices over decades, determining vocational options, access to further training and education in adult

years (Williams et al., 2010), and access to social and material benefits and overall wellbeing (Dinham & Rowe, 2008).

Young adolescents (and their families) commence secondary school with the hope or aspiration that they will learn and develop a sound foundation for their future education and growth within the first few years of secondary school. This foundation ideally enables them to become successful learners, not only throughout secondary school but extending well beyond it (Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Pendergast et al., 2005). Teachers, and the schools and systems they represent have similar hopes and aspirations for these students. Additionally, teachers will be aware, through systemic policies and school operational procedures, of the importance of all students achieving sound educational attainment within these years (Pendergast et al., 2005). There is a strong impetus for teachers of young adolescents, particularly those in Year 7, to provide learning programs that assist such students to make an effective transition and adjustment to secondary school and its programs and to achieve positive learning outcomes (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Luke et al., 2003; Shanks & Dowden, 2015).

Teachers working with young adolescents in secondary schools however, are working within a bounded situation, often with predetermined structures and operational procedures, with time and resource constraints, and specific mandated age and stage related curriculum goals to achieve. Additionally, within secondary education, the education of young adolescents in Year 7 and 8 have been linked with trends of decreased achievement and widespread disengagement for many students. These specific years show increased trends for students to become academic underachievers as they enter secondary school (MCEETYA, 2008). For

those students already underachieving in primary years, academic underachievement may become entrenched, with students becoming increasingly disengaged in their first years of secondary schooling (Griffin, 1988; MCEETYA, 2008; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996).

Many young adolescents attending Australian secondary schools do not achieve expected learning outcomes for their age or grade level despite the systemic policies and programs designed to address these concerns. The effect of academic underachievement for these students may extend beyond their school years and influence future employment and life choices (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Stuart, 1989). Academic underachievement has an influence that extends beyond the wellbeing and attainment scores of students in Year 7 and 8. It has the potential to impact on self-esteem, relationships, future income and long term-wellbeing over a longer time-frame (Pendergast et al., 2005; Shanks & Dowden, 2015).

Middle years' models of practice have been introduced in some schools and systems to address these concerns, but teacher understanding and expertise with middle school practices and the educational needs of young adolescents may vary (Shanks & Dowden, 2013). Not all teachers believe that young adolescents benefit from middle years' practice and pedagogy. Furthermore, teachers do not always underpin their practice with learning theories, models or specific knowledge of the learning needs of young adolescents (Dowden, 2012b).

1.6 Study Claim and Purpose

This study claims that identifying academic underachievers in the classroom is by no means a simple or straightforward task for teachers of students in Year 7 and 8. Chapter 2: Review of the Literature establishes that academic underachievement is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, which may feature in a range of current educational concerns, issues and problems (Figg et al., 2012; Reis & McCoach, 2000). Studies have also highlighted that academic underachievement in young adolescents has been linked with pervasive and long lasting negative effects and impacts that can, over time, develop into negative trends that go well beyond the classroom setting for the student (Benner, 2011; McInerney & Smyth, 2014; Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Academic underachievement may be influenced by added factors such as the transition from primary to secondary school, and wellbeing and specific learning needs that may arise in young adolescence. While middle years' educational models of practice have been introduced in some schools and systems to assist in increasing student engagement and improved academic attainment for young adolescents (Pendergast, 2010; Pendergast, 2016), the use of middle years' practices have been met with a mixed response. These models are not implemented broadly as a widespread approach within Australian schools (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010). Furthermore, teachers struggle with balancing competing demands and agendas from schools, systems and educational reformers, as they work through some of the specific challenges of teaching young adolescents. Teachers may possess varying degrees of knowledge about the education of young adolescents (Dowden, 2012b: Rumble &

Aspland, 2010) and may or may not subscribe to middle years' models of practice or indeed, other specific learning theories.

The study, therefore, attempts to address the gap in the literature between research that highlights the range of theory, policy and practice that exists around the identification of young adolescent academic underachievers, and the perceptions, perspectives and practices observed by teachers in the classroom setting. This study also claims that the identifying adolescent academic underachievers and effective practices teachers can use to support these students remains a pressing concern for many groups in Australia today. These groups include governments and educational policy makers, students and parents, the teachers who work with underachieving students and the schools and systems that educate them.

This study seeks to shed light on how teachers in a regional setting experience, identify and address academic underachievement in the young adolescents they teach: students who are commencing and transitioning into secondary school at the same time as they are undergoing pronounced biological and sociological changes (Bahr, 2010; Santrock, 2008). A secondary aim was to explore student perspectives regarding their learning by investigating challenges identified by a cohort of students transitioning into secondary school. The focus on middle years' models of practice introduces a theme, for some time linked with the education of young adolescents, which has been explored in the second and third research questions which focus on student perspectives and teacher practice. Within this study, perceptions, perspectives and practice have emerged as major themes, with findings indicating that teacher perceptions and perspectives

influence teacher identification of academic underachievers and inform their practice. These primary themes have been used an organising framework or model throughout the study.

1.7 Research Questions

The following research questions underpin the collection of data and provide a framework for the overall study:

1. What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?
2. What factors do young adolescents identify as significant to their learning?
3. What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?

1.8 Research Design

The study is an explanatory mixed methods study using a collective case study approach to collecting and interpreting data (Creswell, 2005; Yin, 2009). Three separate sets of data were collected for this study with three different instrument tools. The first set of data were gathered from a questionnaire circulated to secondary schools within a specific region in Tasmania, Australia. A second data set was obtained from a workshop process which ended with a reflective instrument collecting data which was completed by a cohort of Year 7 students from the region. Both data sets provided quantitative and qualitative data. The third and final data set included qualitative findings gathered from secondary school teachers via semi-structured interviews using an instrument protocol as a

guide. Samples of questionnaires and protocols have been included in Appendix A and B. Findings from the three data sets were processed using descriptive statistics (Creswell, 2005) and inductive thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Thomas, 2013). Prior to collecting data, ethical permissions were obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Tasmania (HREC Social Sciences), the Department of Education, Tasmania, the Tasmanian Catholic Education Office hereafter TCEO, and from all principals of schools with participating teachers and/or students (See Appendices C-G for Ethical approvals, privacy and information statements and permission letters).

1.9 Theoretical Framework

The study utilised a methodological framework or paradigm, which was underpinned by an interpretive constructionist epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Crotty, 1998; Laverty, 2003). This paradigm presents reality as a multi-faceted construction or series of phenomena comprised of events, actions and interpretations influenced and informed by cultural, historical and social contexts. Thus, the study's claim is underpinned by the interpretation that teacher perceptions and beliefs are shaped and influenced by their perspectives formed from personal, professional and background contexts, understandings and interpretation of experienced phenomena. These in turn influence their practice (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Crotty, 1998; Holroyd, 2007).

1.10 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organised into eight chapters. Chapters 1 to 3 include the introduction to the topic, the literature review and the methodology used in the

study. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the findings from the three discrete data sets and provide a preliminary discussion for each data set. Chapter 7 comprises a discussion chapter which synthesises and analyses findings from all three data sets, addressing the research questions. Chapter 8 summarises key findings, presents the limitations of the research, opportunities for further research and provides a conclusion to the study. Contents from individual chapters are outlined below.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature in the field and establishes the context of the study. The chapter elaborates further on the definitions of academic underachievement and presents models and theories of underachievement. The chapter then discusses contextual and background factors and concerns commonly found in the first two years of secondary school, including middle years' educational models (Pendergast, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007), transitions from primary to secondary school learning, the young adolescent learner, policies and teacher and student perspectives. The chapter discusses differing perspectives regarding academic underachievement and relationships and differences between academic underachievement and disengagement and curriculum and pedagogies.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodologies used in detail. The chapter begins by situating the study as a mixed-methods collective case study informed by an interpretive paradigm. (Creswell, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Yin, 2009). The chapter provides a background to the epistemology underpinning the subject and descriptions of the case setting and context before describing recruitment of participants and ethical considerations and permissions. The study includes three data sets and presents the methods used within each data set individually.

Chapter 4 presents the data gathered from a questionnaire circulated to Catholic school teachers and state-school teachers from the regional research site. Findings from responses to questions for each category are tabled and outlined in the requisite section. Chapter 4 concludes with a short summary to assist with an overall perspective on respondents and their background contexts.

Chapter 5 reports the findings from the second data set taken from responses from a cohort of Year 7 students. The quantitative and qualitative data reported in Chapter 5 offers an alternative window or lens on findings stemming from teachers, and outlines concerns and issues for young adolescents in the Year 7 classroom setting. Ethical considerations meant that the entire cohort was surveyed, rather than individual students or those identified as academic underachievers.

Chapter 6 reports on findings from interviews of teachers working within the secondary school sector in regional Northern Tasmania. The chapter presents the findings using a conceptual framework that emerged while using thematic analysis techniques on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The chapter presents teacher perceptions on key characteristics when identifying young adolescent academic underachievers, explores perspectives on factors that impact on academic underachievers, then outlines teacher practice when addressing underachievement in the classroom setting.

Chapter 7 explores and discusses findings from all three data sets reported in the previous three chapters. The chapter addresses the research questions, examining these findings using themes emerging from the data as a conceptual framework or paradigm. Each of the three research questions is linked with one of

the major themes. The discussion considers teacher perceptions when identifying academic underachievers; student and teacher perspectives regarding factors that impact on classroom achievement; and teacher practice when addressing academic underachievement.

Chapter 8 provides an overview and summary of the complete study and revises methods and paradigms, main findings and discussion points. Chapter 8 also discusses the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research before concluding and providing the reader with final closing remarks.

1.11 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter outlined the scope, context, purpose and claims of the study, introducing the topic and providing a background and a rationale. The classroom teacher's perspective was then outlined and an exploration of the complex topic of the academic underachiever was presented, as well as a brief discussion of young adolescents and middle years' education. The chapter then made a statement of the problem, outlined the study's claims, highlighted gaps in the literature and emphasised the overall purpose and aims. The research questions were stated, research design described and a brief discussion of the theoretical framework occurred which supports the methodologies used in the study. Finally, the chapter provided an outline of the overall study structure and chapters. The next chapter, Chapter 2: Review of the Literature, provides a more detailed exploration of key concepts, definitions, literatures, policies and factors that impact on academic underachievement, young adolescents, teachers, perspectives and practices.

It is anticipated that this study will assist to explore, illuminate and draw attention to some of the complexities and ambiguities that form part of this common concern for many young adolescents, their parents and their teachers within a specific case and context. In doing so, the study utilises empirical evidence within an interpretive constructionist paradigm, shedding light on and providing a contribution to and exploration of current professional practice and how this may impact on the young adolescent academic underachiever in Year 7 and 8.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

As more and more students live outside of traditional narratives of childhood, family and school, more and more are at risk of educational underachievement, disengagement or failure (Luke et al., 2003, p 16).

2.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter provides a review of the literature in the field to establish the context, purpose and scope of the study. The literature review outlines the research existing on underachieving young adolescents and examines the complexity and lack of clarity in definitions and identification of these students. The chapter discusses the groups included and excluded from the study and current models of underachievement. The review then introduces the concept of the young adolescent learner, and explores related aspects of middle years' education, and disengagement from learning during young adolescence. Distinctions between underachievement and disengagement and factors that impact on young adolescent academic achievement are considered, including the impacts of transition on underachievement and the use of middle years' education models as a potential solution to these concerns. The review then outlines global, national and local trends and perspectives on underachievement, including Catholic and state education department policies and programs. The review then concludes with teacher and student perspectives and teacher practice.

Table 2.1 presents a visual outline of key concepts, topics and issues, underpinning the study which are explored in the literature review. The Table includes all items which appear in sections with level 1 and 2 headings in Chapter

2 (see sections 2.2-2.18). Subtopics discussed in the literature review, (grouped under level 3 headings), have not been included in Table 2.1, to simplify the visual representation for the reader.

Table 2.1

Conceptual Outline of the Literature Reviewed for the Thesis

Identifying and Supporting Young Adolescent Academic Underachievers in the Year 7 and 8 Classroom.

Underachievement: Contexts and Complexities	**The Young Adolescent Learner**
• Defining Underachievement	• Middle Years Education
• Underachievement as a Systemic Phenomenon	• Disengagement from Learning during Young Adolescence
• Problems with Identification	• Distinctions between Disengagement and Underachievement
• Factors Contributing to Underachievement	• Academic Underachievement in Year 7 and 8
• Models of Underachievement	• Factors that Impact on Young Adolescent Academic Underachievement

Perceptions, Perspectives and Practice.

- Middle Years' Models of Practice as a Solution
- Global and National Trends and Perspectives on Underachievement
- Teacher Perspectives and Practices
- Student Perceptions and Perspectives

2.2 Underachievement: Contexts and Complexities

McCall (1994) has defined underachievement as follows:

> Conceptually, an academic underachiever is a student who performs more poorly in school, typically as measured by grade average, than one would predict based on his or her mental or educational ability, often measured by IQ, aptitude or educational achievement tests (McCall, 1994, p. 15).

The OECD (1998) presented a different perspective on underachievement, noting that reasons behind student failure to achieve fall into three categories, psychological, social and institutional. The authors have located academic underachievement within the territory of educational failure, extending beyond the individual student, something that may impact on or be caused by teachers, schools and systems. As such, underachievement is presented as a very complex issue as "failure at school is the product of the interaction of many variables" (OECD, 1998, p.11).

The OECD (1998) argued for a less-stigmatising term, exploring some of the complexities behind the historical concepts and policies surrounding underachieving students and individual and institutional failure. It was highlighted that there was an increased prevalence of academic underachievement occurring in the transition from primary to the junior years of secondary school. Additionally, underachievement and low achievement were viewed as terms that apply to students "whose academic performance is significantly below the average for their age group" (OECD, 1998, p.10). A further term was identified as applying to underachieving students, 'selective clients'; this includes the student who chooses

which subjects he or she intends to achieve within, based on interest, teacher, or a variety of other issues that stem from the individual student's personal views and circumstances.

Historically, how underachievement has been defined and viewed tends to be dependent on the perspective of the writer or group and to reflect the purpose of the writer or group. Thus, the term has appeared student-centred, focusing on the difficulties of the individual student and their personal wellbeing (Fuller, 1998; Krause & Krause, 1981), or institutionally or group-centred, where the focus is to review or critique a system, a philosophy, a school or schooling, ineffective teachers or educational system (Gorard & Smith, 2004; OECD, 1998). McCall's (1994) definition does not restrict academic underachievement to failure to meet year or grade level outcomes nor is underachievement necessarily viewed as low achievement. Within McCall's definition, underachievement occurs when the student does not meet predicted or expected outcomes, which may be based on a variety of criteria and conditions. Common signs of underachievers listed by McCall include the following:

> these students do not try, they appear lazy, they seem immature (for example, getting upset if they do not get their way), act up, appear very shy, blame others for their failure, dismiss the whole enterprise as "stupid" or "boring", or lack self-confidence, or are rebellious (as cited by Griffin, 1988, p.30).

In the description cited above, McCall described behaviours and tendencies of students who are underachieving in the classroom, noting how these behaviours are often connected to or result in underachievement. The signs listed by McCall

appear to link underachievement to disengagement and perhaps could be described more accurately as signs of the disengaged student in general. However, as outlined in Chapter 1, disengagement and underachievement are terms where the meaning is not synonymous. They may commonly appear together as factors in models of underachievement or of disengagement. Furthermore, the presence of one may lead to or correlate with the presence of the other (Thomas, 2013). However, there is a significant difference in meaning between these two phenomena and they are not used interchangeably within this study.

Griffin (1988), in a seminal study on underachievement, maintained that there was no consistent agreement on the definition for 'underachievers' in education. This claim continues to be made by many other educators, who highlight the complexities that lie beneath the seemingly innocuous term (Gorard & Smith, 2004; McCall, Evahn, & Kratzer, 1992; OECD, 1998; Reis & McCoach, 2000; Smith, 2005). As Reis and McCoach (2000) and McCall et al., (1992) have noted, conceptual definitions of underachievement are complicated by the differences in groups represented within each definition, while operational definitions are complicated by an inconsistency across the board in what underachievement is measuring. Griffin (1988) wrote that Dowdall and Colangelo, for example, utilised 15 different definitions for underachievement related to gifted students. Thus, the term appears complex and many-layered, with different meanings in different contexts. There can be a lack of clarity in the research as to exactly who the underachievers might be (Smith, 2010). Additionally, underachievement often forms a subsidiary part of other fields in education as opposed to an independent topic on its own (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Underachievement has been linked with low achievement (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2005), poor self-esteem, and psychological concerns (Krause & Krause, 1981) as well as physiological, cultural, socio-economical and learning barriers. Underachievement may be related to gifted and talented students (Van Tassel-Baska, 2005), boys in education (Jha & Kelleher, 2006), social emotional issues, social-economic or language and cultural barriers, students at risk, and learning difficulties and barriers (Louden et al., 2000). It may also include groups from different or minority cultures and Indigenous students (Colker, 2011). Underachievement may appear alongside and be equated with disengagement, an equally multi-faceted term and concept (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Thomas, 2013), but one with qualitative differences in what it denotes (Thomas, 2013). Furthermore, there may be confusion between the definition of low-achievement versus underachievement. As with disengagement, the terms low achievement and underachievement may also be conflated, leading to further ambiguities and complexities, especially prevalent in government policies and programs (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Moreau, 2011; Smith, 2010). Griffin (1998) highlighted the need for caution and rigour in both the identification of underachievers or low achievers. Who is deciding that the student is an underachiever? What are the criteria for underachievement? Griffin's response was to review how we define achievement and high achievers and to keep this in mind, when looking at underachievement.

2.3 Defining Underachievement

McCall's (1994) definition potentially includes those students who are either identified as gifted and talented or those who have a learning difficulty or a

language barrier, who nevertheless are achieving far less than expected by their teachers as predicted by test scores or demonstrated ability in specific situations. Reis and McCoach (2000) excluded discrepancies that arose in results that stemmed from a diagnosed learning disability from their operational definition. However, as noted by Reis and McCoach (2000) and by McCall et al. (1992), the operational aspect of this definition is problematic and has been problematic for decades. This raises certain questions, for example: how is the standard for student academic achievement or underachievement determined and measured; and what are the parameters of this measurement? Is measurement based on standardised test scores and are these scores accurate assessments of student ability? How far from a standard deviation on a test score would be considered an accurate reflection of underachievement? How long a period should be considered to determine underachievement? As the authors noted, the operational definitions of underachievement can be as complex and variable as the conceptual definitions (McCall et al., 1992; Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Krause and Krause (1981), in positing their three-part model of underachievement, utilised definitions which were like that of McCall's (1992), to create a more dynamic and fluid definition. This definition expanded on the linear model of underachievement defined as a set of expected learning outcomes averaged for age and year level, which were predicted from achievement scores attained in standardised assessments and tests. Krause and Krause's expanded definition outlined underachievement as "a complex interaction between deficits in academic skills, such as reading and mathematics, deficient self-control skills, and interfering affective factors" (Krause & Krause, 1981, p. 152).

This definition is closely linked to their theoretical model, which is explored further in this chapter. Nevertheless, despite its dynamic nature, as with McCall's definition, Krause and Krause's conceptualisation tended to view academic underachievement from an individualistic or student-centred perspective, removed from any exploration of the social context. This definition of underachievement is unrelated to any social models and does not appear to be impacted by external factors such as school or teacher failure, as discussed by Kovacs and Hasan (OECD, 1994) or alluded to by Griffin (1988).

2.4 Underachievement as a Systemic Phenomenon

A further perspective on the topic of underachievement was provided in the recently published Gonski Review of funding for Australian Schools (Gonski, 2011). While the central focus for this review was on the complexities and inequities of funding across Australian schools and its impact on schools, students and educational outcomes, the review, nevertheless, systematically addressed gaps in achievement in student outcomes from international, national and local perspectives. The review tables 41 separate recommendations for funding improvements, which link to 26 key findings. The first key finding noted a need for Australian funding for schools to lift the performance of all students, especially those students who achieved the lowest outcomes. Furthermore, this finding was linked with the requirement for Australian schools and systems to improve student outcomes within the International context, where Australia's standing in literacy, numeracy and scientific knowledge has stalled or decreased over the last decade. Clearly, while the individual underachieving student was not a specific topic within

the Gonski review, the overall findings suggested that recent Australian performance in student educational outcomes was underpinned by a subtle theme of consistent low-level academic underachievement across the board, and prevalent in specific groups and schools (Gonski, 2011).

2.5 Problems with Identification

Adding to the issue of complexity and limitations in past and current definitions of 'underachievers', or students who are perceived as 'low achievers' is the conflation that may occur between students identified with learning disabilities or disorders and those who are identified as 'academic underachievers'. In many ways, the confusion with defining the term 'underachiever' parallels and is entwined with the issue of establishing an agreed on and uniform definition for learning disabilities. The learning disability definition has, historically, been equally ambiguous (Elkins & Poed, 2011). Compare for example McCall's definition for underachievers cited previously with the following recently revised definition of learning disabilities taken from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V* (DSM V):

1. A group of disorders characterised by difficulties in learning basic academic skills (currently or by history), that are not consistent with the person's chronological age, educational opportunities, or intellectual abilities. Multiple sources of information are to be used to assess learning, one of which must be an individually administered, culturally appropriate, and psychometrically sound standardised measure of academic achievement.

2. The disturbance in criterion A, without accommodations, significantly interferes with academic achievement or activities of daily living that require these academic skills (Colker, 2011).

While the definition from the DSM V includes the necessity for a standardized assessment or test of a student's abilities, many underachieving students might achieve poorly on such tests, especially if they disengage with the process, refuse questions or activities, or demonstrate other disengaged behaviours students may use to avoid potential failure. Additionally, their cultural backgrounds and life experiences may preclude them from achievement on a range of standardized tests, despite the 'culturally appropriate' caveat above. For example, note the mixed findings from a study on responses by Australian Indigenous students to testing conducted in culturally appropriate settings (Chaffey, Bailey, & Vine, 2003). In this case, the testing, following the authors' dynamic assessment model, was supported by the presence of an Indigenous elder, utilised an approach that included a response to intervention assessment, and was created to be culturally appropriate. The authors, in this case, regretfully concluded "that even relatively culturally fair nonverbal standardised tests may not reveal the true academic potential of culturally different and low SES children" (Chaffey et al., 2003, p 93). The authors have labelled such students as 'invisible' underachievers.

Colker noted that in many states within the US, previous definitions for 'learning disability' or disorders have relied on a Response to Intervention Model (RTI), to indicate a learning disability (Colker, 2011). Thus, students who are not achieving sound academic outcomes might be given an intervention providing remediation and support. As she pointed out "the move to a RTI-only approach (to

identify learning disabilities in students) allows all underachievers to be classified as SLD (special learning difficulties) without requiring that the reasons underlying the achievement of each child shall be diagnosed" (Colker, 2011, p. 96).

It is by no means a straightforward process to distinguish between academic underachievement, failure to achieve due to a learning disability that has not been diagnosed, low achievement and 'invisible' academic underachievement that reflects a hidden barrier such as a language barrier, or low SES status or cultural minority status.

2.6 Factors Contributing to Underachievement

While underachievement within schools may represent or describe a single phenomenon for the student, the extant and diverse body of research also draws attention to some of the complexities and disparate causes and contributing factors behind academic underachievement. These include emotional or affective causes, motivational causes, beliefs and attributions (Bergin & Bergin, 2012; Carr et al., 1991) and academic reasons (Krause & Krause, 1981) Furthermore, as discussed earlier, students who present with a variety of barriers that impact on their learning within the classroom may be included in underachieving groups. These barriers may arise from physical, psychological, biological, factors such as social and/or cultural reasons, or students may have a diagnosed learning impediment such as a receptive language disorder, dyspraxia, or auditory processing disorder. This may impede their learning within the classroom (such as the acquisition of literacy skills), but the impact may be restricted predominantly to classroom learning, not necessarily impact on other areas of the student's functioning or

wellbeing (Farrell, 2009). Such students appear to be underachieving due to lack of personal effort or individual motivation whereas their real difficulties may lie in accessing an undifferentiated curriculum, disaffection or disengagement due to background factors such as parenting styles and language, social and cultural factors (Bergin & Bergin, 2012) poor or unsuitable resources or ineffective teaching practices (Luke et al., 2003; OECD, 1998).

2.7 Models of Underachievement

A variety of models or theories behind academic underachievement have been developed that explore the complexities behind the identification of student academic underachievement, its causes and remedies. Carr et al., (1991) for example, developed a metacognitive motivational model that focused on self-esteem, beliefs and attributions. Krause and Krause (1981) posited a multi-modal theory of academic underachievement. This model allowed for underachievement to encompass a variety of groups and phenomena, while remaining a distinct phenomenon. The model formulated three main elements contributing to underachievement. These included self-control, affective and academic factors (Krause & Krause, 1981). Models such as these addressed the complexity behind the definition and identification of underachievement, as well as attempting to remediate some of the factors underlying this phenomenon.

2.7.1 Multi-modal model of underachievement

The four main factors comprising underachievement identified by Krause and Krause (1981) are skills deficit, personality dysfunction, self-control and anxiety. In their examination of the literature, Krause and Krause noted that

academic underachievement was often successfully assisted by remediation that addresses any one of these four factors individually. However, the literature also suggested that remediation targeting only a single factor might also be unsuccessful. For example, the authors claimed that these findings supported the premise that many instances of student academic underachievement are comprised of more than one factor at any time. Additionally, the authors claimed that the four primary factors interacted with each other, thus remediation was complex and needed to be multipronged, addressing all identified factors for it to be successful (Krause & Krause, 1981). In advancing their theory of a multi-modal model of underachievement, the authors combined two factors, anxiety and personality dysfunction, into one. Thus, their streamlined model included three main components of underachievement: academic, affective and self-control.

However, the Krause and Krause model has two potential limitations. While their multi-modal theory is conceptualised as dynamic or interactive, use of the theory as a model or set of practices to address academic underachievement, tends to follow a linear and sequential approach in both identification and remediation, whereby the presenting factors are addressed one by one, first academic, then self-control and finally affective factors. Each factor is subsequently eliminated in progression if the underachievement does not improve. This model appears to overlook the potential for factors to require being addressed simultaneously or in fact, if interacting with each other in a dynamic fashion, requiring a comprehensive approach more immediately. The second possible limitation is that of context or lack of a complementary social model for underachievement. Student

underachievement may also be impacted on, influenced by, or dynamically modified by social contexts and external relationships.

2.7.2 Metacognitive motivational model

Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger and Pressley's Metacognitive Motivational model (as cited in McCall et al., 1992) focused on motivational aspects of underachievement (Carr et al., 1991), including low self-esteem, inaccurate attributions and a lack of persistence; a model which the authors noted, supported Krause and Krause's multi-dimensional model (1981). This model also placed a strong emphasis on the significance of attributions, beliefs and self-esteem in explaining underachievement. While it centred on the individual student's perspective and sense of agency as a strong factor in underachievement, the model also connected the attributions theory to students with learning difficulties. The authors noted that students with learning difficulties also often held similar beliefs regarding a lack of success being unrelated to effort, persistence or effective strategy (Carr et al., 1991).

2.7.3 Growth and fixed mindsets and implicit intelligence theories

In her ground-breaking work exploring student reactions and responses to failure, Dweck (1999; 2006) noted the significance of student self-beliefs or "growth or fixed mindsets" around intelligence and competence, to growth in learning and student responses to failure. Dweck's seminal work (1999) on mindsets and helpless or mastery-oriented learning and implicit theories of intelligence may illuminate student reactions and perception regarding academic attainment, underpinning student responses to both academic failure and

perceived teacher quality. The 'high achieving' students attaining strong learning outcomes independently of teacher quality, as noted by Bempechat, Li, Neier, Gillis and Holloway (2011), may be students who have learned, inherited or developed a growth oriented mindset, that assists in over-riding academic setbacks or difficulties (Dweck, 1999; 2006; Romero, Master, Paunesku, Dweck, & Gross, 2014). These students may hold an incremental theory of intelligence which, when combined with a goal focused orientation, may encourage the development of learning and higher levels of academic achievement (Dupreyat & Marine, 2005; Dweck, 1999).

2.7.4 Educational, psychological and social models

On the other hand, the OECD (1998) do not separate underachievers from the social context and environment, arguing that failure to achieve may lie more with schools and systems than individuals. This claim is supported by the finding that underachievement can be a nebulous term when used in the arena of the gifted and talented (Griffin, 1988). Populations of gifted and talented 'underachievers' may include a substantial number of students from middle class and privileged populations (OECD, 1998). Underachieving students may certainly come from minority groups and low socio-economic populations (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008). However, such underachievers may be characterised as 'invisible' or overlooked underachievers (Chaffey et al., 2003), whose lack of achievement might be expected through environmental factors or background circumstances. Alternatively, as posited by Gorard and Smith (2004), students from minority groups and those from a low socio-economic background, might more accurately be termed 'low achievers'

rather than underachievers. However, this argument is problematic in that it could be perceived to support the claim that different achievement levels might acceptably be used to characterise different groups in society (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Moreau, 2011; Smith, 2005). It implies a social construction of underachievement linked to socio-economic status or cultural groups, a phenomenon noted by Dunne and Gazeley (2008) in a similar small-scale study of teachers' identification of underachieving students and social class in English state secondary schools. Findings from the study suggested that class beliefs and assumptions underpinned how teachers constructed and then supported student underachievement. Furthermore, the authors claimed that teacher constructions of underachievement were fluid and dependent on the context and background of the students they taught.

Predominantly most models and theories of underachievement fall into one of two main categories-educational and psychological. These tend to emphasise the individual underachiever and usually attempt to address and remediate causes of academic failure through programs tailored to match and support individual student needs. Within Australia, underachievement, particularly in the middle years, has been linked with students 'at risk' (Luke et al., 2003; Stehlik, 2013). This term describes a diverse group of students, which may include students of Indigenous heritage and backgrounds (Chaffey et al., 2003), students with disability, gender based groups, students with language backgrounds other than English hereafter LBOTE, (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations hereafter DEEWR, 2013; Stehlik, 2013) and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Luke et al., 2003; Stehlik, 2013). Various policies have been

introduced across the states and territories to target 'at risk' groups that have resulted in resources and programs designed to address disengagement and academic underachievement (Stehlik, 2013). However, there appears to be a lesser body of research and policies which explore and link individual academic underachievement with specific research on learning barriers, disability, motivational barriers related to mental health concerns and social economic barriers such as poverty. The OECD (1998) highlighted the lack of a social model of underachievement. Literature that addresses school and system failure, such as the Gonski Report (Gonski, 2011) has drawn attention to the social and environmental aspects of underachievement, exploring the factors influencing student underachievement and relating these to environment and contexts, such as inadequate schooling, poor resources and social failure (Gonski, 2011; Luke et al., 2003). Likewise, the prevalence of middle schooling philosophies and programs lend credence to an underpinning social model and theory of underachievement that shadows current educational policy.

2.8 The Young Adolescent Learner

Proponents of middle years' education have long argued that the young adolescent learner period is fraught with challenge for students and educators alike, calling for specific teaching styles and methods if teachers are to enable young adolescent learners to achieve success (Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2010; Pendergast, 2016; Shanks & Dowden, 2015). However, not all educators agree that the characteristics of the young adolescent learner call for a specific approach and philosophy of education (Chadbourne, 2001), or, indeed, that the characteristics of

this group are, in fact, the same for all students (Bahr, 2010; Pendergast & Main, 2013; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

Bahr (2010) identified four major paradigms, constructions or models of adolescence that influence and inform most educational approaches for young adolescents. These include biological (Moreno, 2010), psychosocial (Santrock, 2008), social construction and cultural construction (Bahr, 2010). She argued that each of these theories, to some extent, is an incomplete picture of adolescence, including young adolescence, and represents a specific approach or lens that offers a perspective on adolescence which can be both helpful and limiting (Bahr, 2010). Her views reflect those of educators and theorists such as Chadbourne (2001), Chadbourne and Pendergast (2010), Pendergast and Main (2013), and Santrock (2008). Luke et al., (2003) wrote extensively about the complexities and varying agendas underpinning the construction of the young adolescent or middle years' learner. These authors highlighted the need for clarification around the issues associated with the education of young adolescents. Many question the view often associated with middle years' education that posits young adolescence as a fully defined and potentially deficit life stage (Pendergast & Main, 2013). These issues and concerns in many ways shadow and mirror the debates and multiple definitions of underachievement and learning difficulties discussed earlier.

For example, the focus of biological theories, including recent brain-based theories (Crawford, 2007), on physical change, often downplay the influences of the environmental, cultural and social worlds of young adolescents, or for that matter, the influence of secondary school and the learning environment. In addition, the psychosocial theory is a 'maturational model' (or age-stage theory) that highlighted

a ‘lock-step’ approach of development of cognition from concrete to formal operations in thinking outlined by Piaget and of moral or ethical behaviour, such as Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (Santrock, 2008). While psychosocial theories offer useful concepts on life development, they may be limited in application. Young adolescents do not all think in a similar way, they come from different backgrounds and cultures, they mature at different rates, they have different abilities and they may vary in their ability to use higher order thinking skills or in the application of concepts to activities. Additionally, the type of thinking and the complexity of activities that students engage in may vary within different contexts, cultures and disciplines, again, both from student to student and from subject to subject or activity and area.

Social construction theory views the adolescent learner as a social being, actively constructing knowledge in a blend of environmental, social and individual influences (Jaffe, 1998; Santrock, 2008). The cultural model suggests that adolescence itself is a cultural construction which reflects social and historical influences and types of thinking (Bahr, 2010; Chadbourne, 2001). The first two constructs of adolescence have been criticised as focusing on adolescence as a ‘deficit model’, where the teenager is viewed as an entity that is ‘becoming’ but has not yet arrived (Bahr, 2010; Luke et al., 2003). Social construction theory predominantly presents a positive perspective that views the young adolescent as a ‘whole person’, nevertheless it does not account for all learning or activities that occur in a young person’s life. Social construction theory also centres on learning that is based in language, excluding other forms of learning and, indeed, other ways of thinking or constructing knowledge. Bahr (2010) proposed the ‘dynamic life

path model' as a useful model for educators. This model presents the young adolescent as a composite of individual characteristics, wants and needs which are constantly interacting and changing with environmental, social and familial influences. This model shares some characteristics with life course theory, argued by Benner (2011) as being particularly relevant to understanding transitions in education. Santrock (2008) argued that all models and concepts may be of some help in different circumstances and can be reliably understood to represent statistical averages across groups and populations. He outlined his position as that of being an informed 'eclectic' using various models and approaches as they appear helpful and appropriate to the situation and context.

Within the literature, 'early adolescence' or 'young adolescence' sometimes appears to be used interchangeably. Early adolescence, as such, may be characterised as part of a distinct life stage construct or model within medical, psychological and educational fields (Jaffe, 1998; Santrock, 2008). As outlined within the glossary, within this study the term 'young adolescent' follows the convention of Pendergast (2010), Pendergast and Main (2013), Bahr (2010), and Smyth and McInerney (2007), viewing the young adolescent as a complex and composite social construction, except when referring to early adolescence as a specific psychological stage as discussed by authors such as Moreno (2010), Santrock (2008), Jaffe (1998) and others. This perspective or construction of the young adolescent is supported by the findings of Dinham and Rowe (2007), who noted in their meta-analysis that:

> it is unwise to over-generalise about young people during their middle years of schooling.... While some may find the transition from primary to high

> school difficult, many will be ready for and will relish this change. Whereas some may benefit from an extended period of primary-like education, others will not (Dinham & Rowe, 2007, p. 13).

2.9 Middle Years Education

Research supporting middle years' educational reforms and practices suggest that pedagogy and curriculum needs to be tailored specifically to enable young adolescents within the middle years attain optimal outcomes (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007, 2012b; Jacobs, 2010; Luke, et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2010). Middle years' education refers to a period generally understood to include young adolescents and pre-adolescents: students aged from 10 to 15 years, or Years' 5-8 or 5-9 in formal school systems (Pendergast, 2010; Pendergast, 2016). Alternatively known as middle schooling or the middle years (Bahr, 2010; Chadbourne, 2001; Pendergast, 2010; Williams et al., 2010) the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians noted* the significance of this period for students:

> The middle years are an important period of learning, in which knowledge of fundamental disciplines is developed, yet this is also a time when students are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Student motivation and engagement in these years is critical (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 12).

These beliefs have underpinned educational reform on the international and national scene, promoting a philosophy of teaching and learning commonly known as 'middle years' education. Much of the middle years' reform agenda is targeted to

tackle the issues outlined, including decreased student outcomes, plateauing results and poor engagement with schooling, as well as to create a 'seamless transition from primary to secondary' schooling (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010, p. 31). Middle years' models of practice include: advocating a reduction in the number of teachers working with students in the junior years of secondary school; providing integrated and age-relevant curriculum for young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Jacobs, 2010); improving relationships and social well-being through a focus on a caring and smaller community; use of pedagogies and curriculum designed to engage young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Pendergast, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2015); providing an increased ability for students to negotiate and engage with the curriculum, through constructivist learning theories (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Richardson, 2003), including practices such as learner-centred curriculum and project-based learning (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007). Some schools and educational systems within Australia have attempted to instigate change and reform within the middle years of schooling, aiming to improve the pastoral and academic transitions of students between primary and secondary schooling, and to ultimately improve overall learning outcomes for all students (Cobbold, 2005; Pendergast, 2010).

Middle schooling reform and philosophies seek to address many of the identified concerns that accompany the education of students within this age-group. Identified challenges that form part of the middle years' agenda include a greater number of disengaged, alienated, bored or disruptive students (Cummings & Cormack, 1996; Pendergast, 2016), poorer learning outcomes and an increase in behavioural and social problems. Other issues include a range of wellbeing

concerns such as increased reports of bullying (Nilan et al., 2015), increased levels of depression, eating disorders, substance abuse and self-harm (Chadbourne, 2001; Pendergast & Danby, 2011). The increase in wellbeing concerns in Year 8 students and their impact on schooling have been well-documented within Australian schools by Redmond et al., (2016) in their seminal report *Are the kids alright? Young Australians in the Middle Years.*

Middle years' models of practice tend to focus on providing learner-centered curricula and pedagogies that engage young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Luke et al., 2003), helping them form connections to the school, strong and positive relationships to their teachers and community, as well as to their learning (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Pendergast & Danby, 2011; Pendergast et al., 2005). Middle years' models of practice emphasise constructivist pedagogies, the construction of knowledge as a shared enterprise and collaborative learning practices (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Richardson, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). Richardson (2003) has linked five characteristics of constructivist approaches in learning including:

1. knowledge of the individual learner, or student-centred or student focused learning;
2. use of collaborative groups to construct shared understandings of concepts or knowledge;
3. both planned and spontaneous use of "formal" learning such as use of specific resources or explicit or focused teaching of concepts and content;

4. creation of tasks, activities or options for students to trial, engage with, adapt or interrogate knowledge presented; and
5. enhancing students metacognitive understanding of how and what they learn.

Dowden (2012a) noted that schools implementing a middle years' approach rely on teachers demonstrating key characteristics including a comprehensive understanding of young adolescents, commitment to working in teams, to using a range of pedagogies to engage their students and to integrate key learning across subject areas where possible. Integrating curriculum across subjects and disciplines often appears as a key feature within school programs offering a middle years' focus and can be linked with constructivist pedagogies. However, it is important to clarify that constructivist pedagogies do not necessarily imply the use of integrated curriculum. Dowden (2007) also clarified and distinguished between various curricula approaches that can be found in middle years' curriculum designs, noting that the area of curriculum integration included a range of ambiguous terminology. More specifically Dowden noted a distinction between curriculum driven by bottom up or top down theoretical underpinnings. These included 'democratic' (Beane, 2013) or negotiated or integrative curricula (Dowden, 2007) that was essentially student or learner-centered at heart. Here, students participated in project based learning (and often practical learning) around key concepts and outcomes negotiated between students and teacher/s. Top down curriculum designs or multidisciplinary models used principles of integration but were subject driven and offered less scope for individual student negotiation or exploration (Dowden, 2007). As Jacobs (2010) wrote these models

were pragmatic compromises, allowing teachers and systems to ensure that agreed on or 'essential' content, skills and assessment had been included in planning and programs.

Findings from Dowden's study (2012a) suggested that teachers working within schools with dedicated middle years programs believe in the potential of middle years teaching methods but do not always have the depth of knowledge to practice these consistently. Specifically, Dowden noted that teacher knowledge of young adolescents or early adolescence development was basic and undeveloped (Dowden, 2012b).

Other practices underpinning middle years' models of education include using higher order thinking skills, embedding of digital technologies (Pendergast, 2016; Pendergast et al., 2005; Smyth & McInerney, 2007) and a focus on teaching for understanding by depth, rather than breadth, in course content (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010; Sejnost, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). Methods may include providing support targeting the emotional concerns of students (Smyth & McInerney, 2007); increasing connections between teacher and student (Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel, Muenko, McNeish, & Russell, 2017); and students and the school community (Stehlik, 2013).

As noted by Beane (2013) and Dowden (2007) methods that use a student-centred approach, work to engage students through flexibly delivered curriculum that is open to negotiation and change (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast & Danby, 2011; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). These methods also allow scope for increasing students' connection to their community, for the

development of autonomy and provide opportunities to differentiate curricula for diverse abilities and contexts (Dowden, 2007).

Where teachers see positive results from learning philosophies and educational models, they may incorporate these into their practice. However, if results require arduous and continuous change, teachers may remain converts only during the time that they have the resources and system support to sustain the changes (Davis, 2009). They may adapt their beliefs to retain a faith in the philosophy as an ideal, while remaining sceptical of systems and policy makers who are not providing the necessary support (Dilkes, Cunningham, & Gray, 2014). This largely practical perspective, a form of applied eclecticism not dissimilar to the position outlined earlier by Santrock (2008), may account for the some of the mixed success of the middle years' reform move in Australia (Pendergast et al., 2005; Shanks & Dowden, 2015; Smyth & McInerney, 2007)

2.10 Disengagement from Learning during Young Adolescence

The young adolescent may be viewed as a convenient concept that describes a range of attributes, characteristics, traits and behaviours in students (Bahr, 2010) with middle years' education considered a relatively useful model used in schools and systems (MCEETYA, 2008; Pendergast, 2010) even if it is not endorsed by all stakeholders. Nevertheless, the research is conclusive regarding the trend of disengagement from learning in the early years of secondary school (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008; Pendergast & Danby, 2011; Redmond et al., 2016; Shanks & Dowden, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2009; Tadich, Deed, Campbell, & Prain, 2007; Williams et al., 2010).

The OECD described three main groups of students at risk of disengaging from school in the early years of high school groups. These include students with identifiable learning disabilities, as well as students with learning difficulties, which may not be identified, students with barriers stemming from cultural or language difficulties, and those from a low socio-economic background (Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Under the banner of students with learning difficulties, Garrick and Keogh (2010) included students who are 'low achievers' within this group stating that "no single factor is responsible for their experiencing such difficulties, as they arise from a complex interaction of features including student intellectual ability, prior experience and motivation" (p.70).

Disengagement from learning presents serious challenges to schools, families and systems alike (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). For schools, disengagement from learning may lead to poor overall outcomes and alienation amongst individuals and across cohorts (Elsworth et al., 2004; Fredericks et al.,2004; Schulz & Rubel, 2011; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Disengagement may be linked to school performance results (Slee, 2014; Tadich et al., 2007) and overall school reputation. However, as with the other key concepts in this study, 'student engagement' is 'a something of a slippery term complicated by its adoption as the latest fad word in education', (Smyth & McInerney, 2007, p 108). Like underachievement, engagement can be viewed as a complex and many-faceted construct (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009) underpinned by a wide range of behaviours, relationships and attitudes demonstrated by students across a range of fields and activities, including emotional, behavioural and cognitive aspects (Attard, 2011; Fredericks et al., 2004; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Thomas, 2013). Within the

classroom, disengaged learners may be those students who are perceived by teachers and their peers as disruptive or demanding of time and resources, unwilling to work on or to complete learning activities, whether these be in the classroom or provided as homework (Bempechat et al., 2011; Fredericks et al.,2004; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Pendergast and Danby (2011) claimed that:

> Students who are disengaged from school are unlikely to make significant academic progress; and if they do make progress, it will be in spite of the school, not because of it. Students who become active opponents or passive dissenters at school will become disengaged (p. 303).

Parents and caregivers of disengaged learners may present to the school as anxious, seeking to find answers, to address concerns and causes, or to attach blame (Nye, Turner & Schwartz., 2006). Alternatively, parents may be disengaged from schooling themselves for a variety of reasons ranging from socio-economic disenfranchisement, linguistic and cultural barriers or personal and individual concerns (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

2.11 Distinctions between Disengagement and Underachievement

While the young adolescent underachiever may also be a student who appears disengaged in classroom learning, it is nevertheless important to distinguish between the two terms and what they denote within this study. In the classroom, disengagement describes behaviour that the student is demonstrating. Reasons for disengagement are many and varied. For example, reasons for disengagement from learning may occur because of ineffective teaching, lack of a

connection between teacher and student, curriculum that appears boring or meaningless or otherwise unrelated to the student's interests or needs (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Stehlik, 2013), background factors related to the student's personal life, pastoral concerns and social and cultural reasons among others (Pendergast & Danby, 2011). Slee (2014) in a powerful analysis of disengagement and school alienation, discussed the relationship between disengagement and school testing and accountability results. Slee (2014) contended that the label of disengagement might potentially be used by schools to label academic underachievers as problematic, thus distracting attention from poor school results and refocusing responsibility for this back on the student and family. As Blumenfeld et al., (2004) and Abbott-Chapman (2015) noted, increasing levels of student engagement can be viewed as a solution to a growing problem with youth disaffection with education in general.

Remedying disengagement may occur through addressing the student's concerns, providing more interesting programs, differentiating programs to meet students' individual needs, or providing support programs to increase overall engagement (Abbott-Chapman, 2015; Thomas, 2013). Disengagement may in fact, be a factor that assists the teacher to identify the young adolescent underachiever in the classroom (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). However, it is important to note that there is a qualitative difference between the use of the terms underachievement and disengagement within this study. Students may appear engaged in the classroom, or engaged with schooling and may still be underachieving based on predicted outcomes using test scores or other forms of assessment. Conversely students may achieve satisfactory results overall for their

age and year level and yet remain largely disengaged from key aspects of the learning.

2.12 Academic Underachievement in Year 7 and 8

The body of literature has clearly established that the first two years of secondary school is a significant time in the education of young adolescents. Many students in Year 7 and 8 do not achieve the expected learning outcomes for their age or grade level. Academic outcomes in these years, have been linked with little or no growth in achievement results for students entering Australian secondary schools (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003; Tadich et al., 2007) despite systemic policies and programs designed to address overall poor trends of achievement within these cohorts (Elsworth et al., 2004; Luke et al., 2003).

This period may be characterised by a greater risk of low or stagnated achievement (Benner, 2011; Bergin & Bergin, 2012; Tadich et al., 2007; Towns, 2011; Williams et al., 2010), disengagement and negative behaviours and trends such as alienation, disaffection, absenteeism and risky behaviours (MCEETYA, 2008). Furthermore, this stage in adolescent development has been linked with an increased tendency for underachievement to become an entrenched response that persists throughout secondary school, including disengagement with schooling (Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Griffin, 1988; MCEETYA, 2008; OECD, 1998; Peterson & Colangelo, 1996). National literacy and numeracy results, measured through processes such as the *National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) show that overall achievement trends in literacy and numeracy for Australian students in Year 7 do not show similar growth patterns to previous

results from year 3 and 5 assessments, but instead present flattened or decreased achievement trends for many students (Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2016).

This is not a new phenomenon. Peterson and Colangelo (1996) noted in their study of gifted achievers and underachievers, that Year 7 was a significant year for noted academic underachievement in all areas. Other researchers have also commented on the persistent trend towards increases in the gap between achievement levels in all subject areas in the transition from primary to junior secondary school (Easton & Englehard, 1982; MCEETYA, 2008; OECD, 1998; Pendergast, 2016) and across socio-economic groups, also linking the junior high school years with increased absenteeism and disengagement (Easton & Englehard, 1982).

As such, academic underachievement has been acknowledged as a concern that impacts on many students, and one which may have a specific significance for young adolescents in Year 7 and 8; students who are situated in the 'middle years' of secondary school. Furthermore, while flattened achievement levels for young adolescents has been a persistent trend for decades, for many young adolescents, this issue remains a concern (Fried & Chapman, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Pendergast, 2016; Tadich et al., 2007; Towns, 2011). No evidence is yet available to suggest that these trends have been reversed for students entering secondary school and completing their foundation years of secondary education.

2.13 Factors that Impact on Young Adolescent Academic Achievement

Added to this complex scenario, are several factors that may impact or influence young adolescent academic achievement. These factors include

structural differences in setting and learning models between primary and secondary school (McMahon & Zyngier, 2009) as well as the transition from primary to secondary school settings (Towns, 2011), literacy and numeracy difficulties (Luke et al., 2003); attendance and wellbeing concerns (Balfanz, 2016; Redmond et al., 2016).

There are wide disparities between the needs, capabilities and aptitudes of the students entering secondary school. Australian primary and secondary school systems are generally inclusive and heterogeneous, with classrooms and learning groups being comprised of a wide range of students whose learning profiles and backgrounds are diverse and individualistic. Students commonly in class or year level or age and stage cohorts represent a broad section of abilities and learning needs (Garrick & Keogh, 2010). Students with various learning barriers, capabilities and specific backgrounds that impact on their ability to access and process the learning presented in the classroom, all form part of the group making the transition from primary to secondary schooling (Louden et al., 2000).

There are also considerable differences between the structures and nature of learning in primary and secondary schools. Australian primary school teachers usually work predominantly with one group of students, teaching a largely integrated curriculum, often from a student-centred focus (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010). Secondary school teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to be subject specialists, commonly working with a range of learners, who are organised into year level and faculty groups. Secondary school courses, historically, have been driven by a 'top-down' agenda that focuses on subject-based learning outcomes and exam results (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010; Richardson, 2003).

Practices used by teachers to assist with transition from primary to secondary school often include pastoral and social transition programs (Luke et al., 2003). Researchers also advocate an induction into the range of discourses and types of learning found in secondary school (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010), although these practices may not be as widespread as pastoral programs and inductions. Nevertheless, despite the range of adjustments and supports provided to students, albeit not necessarily consistently, the different contexts of the Australian primary and secondary school help influence or shape the lens through which both primary and secondary school teachers view their teaching and learning agenda (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010).

There may be competing models of practice that are adopted by schools and systems to improve educational outcomes for young adolescents. The importance of a positive transition from primary to secondary schooling, including the effective moderating of transitions between curriculums, appears to be a generally well-accepted topic within educational reform debates (Rumble & Aspland, 2010). Nor is the need for effective teaching methods and quality teachers for young adolescents under dispute (Hattie, 2012; Luke et al., 2003; MCEETYA, 2008), but the learning theories, curricula, pedagogies, and models of practice underpinning these reforms may be (Chadbourne, 2001; Dowden, 2007; Hayes, Christie, Mills, & Lingard, 2006).

2.13.1 The influence of transition on underachievement

While disengagement and underachievement may form causes for concern across all years of schooling from Foundation to Year 12 (Gonski, 2011; Hattie, 2012), it is often in the transition between primary and secondary schooling where

these factors become visible and habitual trends in the young adolescent learner (Benner, 2011; Tadich et al., 2007; Towns, 2011; Williams et al., 2010). As noted previously in Chapter 1, section 1.3, and Chapter 2, section 2.9, the transition from primary to secondary school may be accompanied by a flattening of results in student attainment for students, especially in literacy and numeracy (Dinham & Rowe, 2007, 2008; Elsworth et al., 2004; Luke et al., 2003; Romero et al., 2014). It can be argued that students transitioning into secondary school require both specific learning and educational programs that address the needs of young adolescents (Bahr, 2010; Beane, 2013; Chadbourne, 2001; Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2010) and include supportive transitions between primary and secondary education (Pendergast, 2016; Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Williams et al., 2010).

For example, within most Australian states and territories, students leave primary school at the end of Year 6, transitioning from classrooms, taught predominantly by one teacher presenting a largely integrated curriculum (Moni & Hay, 2011). Student cohorts are usually much smaller than secondary schools. Many primary school students are placed within classes which include well-known peers from their primary schools. They attend a primary school offering many opportunities for family-school interaction on a personal and informal level. Students then commence Year 7 by moving to a larger secondary school, with multiple teachers per year level and disciplinary knowledge that is compartmentalised into separate subjects (Sejnost, 2009).

The secondary school may offer fewer opportunities for informal contact between school and parents and caregivers to develop (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Moni &

Hay, 2011). Students may find the curriculum disconnected and more abstract with curriculum covered in breadth rather than depth (Tadich et al., 2007; Wiggins & McTighe, 2001). As noted previously, students in Year 7 and 8 benefit from pedagogy and curricula that is personally meaningful, includes opportunities for some autonomy or self-direction, and is connected to the community or life world of the young adolescent (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2010). In secondary schools, students and classes are more dependent on the constraints of timetables and schedules, which may involve frequent movement between subjects and rooms (Sejnost, 2009; Smyth & McInerney, 2007) and little scope for immersion and exploration of big concepts or ideas. Thus, many young adolescents face additional challenges in moving from primary to secondary schooling. For students transitioning into secondary school who already present with complex background factors, are less engaged with schooling, demonstrate literacy or numeracy challenges or a range of other potential barriers to learning, the transition between systems may consolidate an emerging trend of academic underachievement at school (Redmond et al., 2016).

2.13.2 Literacy and numeracy in the middle years

Literacy and numeracy trends of student achievement for young adolescents transitioning into secondary school have likewise been highlighted as a cause for concern for some years in Australia (Luke et al., 2003). The seminal report *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al., 2003) provided a broad investigation into literacy and numeracy teaching and programs for young adolescents and highlighted several key findings to assist with improvement. Findings included improved leadership in

schools, a focus on innovation driven by evidence and reinvigorating teacher pedagogies focusing on student outcomes (Luke et al., 2003). Long regarded as the integral building blocks to student success and widespread access to the curriculum, many resources have been channelled into research, programs and funding to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for students (Freebody, 2007; Luke et al., 2003). However, within these trends, programs and reforms, the individual academic underachiever, as in other areas, remains an ambiguous concept, tied to a concept of individual, group, system or policy failure, or need for reform (Freebody, 2007; Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009), or alternatively a curriculum, equity, disability or literacy and numeracy concern.

Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) and Honan (2010) have highlighted the need for teachers to provide engaging and rigorous literacy practices that challenge and extend young adolescent's literacy skills while retaining a connection to their own worlds and identities. The authors claim that these strategies assist engagement and build confidence in struggling adolescent readers, who may be marginalised by low level activities designed to address limited literacy skills (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Honan (2010) noted that simply adjusting material to reflect student interest did not always result in student engagement with reading or literacy practices in the classroom, commenting that "unfortunately, there has been an assumption that engagement somehow means 'having fun' or 'enjoyment'(p.140).

Whilst having fun might encourage student participation initially, a rigorous and structured approach to learning is needed to underpin classroom language

programs to improve literacy outcomes for students in the middle years (Jacob, 2010; Luke et al., 2003).

2.13.3 Attendance and wellbeing factors

Irregular attendance has a negative influence on student academic achievement, participation and engagement and literacy and numeracy outcomes (Sprick, Alabiso, & Yore, 2015). Students missing up to 10 percent of the school year (for any reason) demonstrate poorer educational and long term outcomes in a range of areas (Sprick et al., 2015). Balfanz (2016) has also drawn attention to the specific relationship between student attendance and academic achievement:

> The link couldn't be clearer. Academic achievement from kindergarten on, high school graduation and post-secondary enrolments are all highly sensitive to absenteeism. Missing even a little school has negative effects. Missing a lot of school throws students off track to educational success (p. 10).

Wellbeing concerns including mental health disorders, anxiety issues and bullying at school (Lacey et al., 2017) also impact on young adolescent academic achievement, as do resilience and motivation (Dooley, & Florell, 2006; Fried & Chapman, 2012; Gilman,; Von Battenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013) in addition to school attendance concerns (Balfanz, 2016). Fried and Chapman (2011) indicated links between motivation, engagement and positive achievement in young adolescents. Gilman et al, (2006) noted correlations between a lack of hope and positive expectations for the future and poorer learning outcomes for adolescents in general. Lacey et al., (2017) noted a link between increased

bullying and decreased achievement on school exam scores among Year 7 and 8 students attending schools with a higher incidence of bullying. The authors also commented on the increase in bullying trends noted within middle schools in their study commenting that "students and staff express more concerns about bullying in middle schools than in any other grade levels", (Lacey et al., 2017, p. 193). Redmond et al.'s, (2016) report on young persons' wellbeing in the middle years has provided conclusive data on the increasing gap in academic achievement and other wellbeing indicators between marginalised and non-marginalised students in Year 8, compared to students in Year 4 and 6.

These factors indicate that schooling in Year 7 and 8, the middle years of secondary school is a challenging period, with many complex variables potentially influencing and impacting on the academic achievement and wellbeing of young adolescents (Redmond et al., 2016). Furthermore, the dynamic relationship between motivation, wellbeing and academic achievement discussed in the models unpacked in sections 2.2 to 2.7 add further complexities to this issue. The scope of this study however, requires that focus and attention is predominantly centred on factors and characteristics that classroom teachers identify as significant and the practices they use to address underachievement. Thus, while it is acknowledged that general wellbeing and bullying concerns are important components in the education of young adolescents which may influence academic achievement, these factors are not the predominant focus in this study, which emphasises teacher identification processes and practice around academic outcomes for young adolescents.

2.14 Middle Years Models of Practice as a Solution

Researchers and educators have argued that students in Year 7 and 8 require learning and educational programs specifically targeted to meet their educational, emotional and developmental needs (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Fried & Chapman, 2012; Jacobs, 2010; Pendergast et al., 2005, 2016; Rumble & Aspland, 2010). These researchers claim that secondary school teachers require a highly developed set of skills, knowledge and understanding to successfully meet the learning needs of young adolescents (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016). Thus, advocates of middle years' models of practice claim that improvements and reform within schools will alleviate many of the difficulties and concerns with student achievement and engagement outlined above, situating some of these difficulties within the model of schooling, curricula and pedagogy offered, which is ill suited to the context, social needs and emotional growth of young adolescents (Dowden, 2007; Fried & Chapman, 2012; Luke et al., 2003). Additionally, middle years' educators may purport that some models of adolescence label young adolescence as a problematic developmental stage. These beliefs may be perpetuated by ineffective practices and pedagogies and inflexible curricula that do not cater to the needs and interests of young adolescents (Bahr, 2010; Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Pendergast, 2016). Nevertheless, despite these findings from proponents of middle years educational reformers, constraints, mandates, educational and practical agendas still determine many of the structures and operational processes that surround the secondary school experience of students in Year 7 and 8. Middle schooling models of practice remain a contested issue in Australian schools (Shanks & Dowden, 2015), while scholarly and professional debate continues

regarding the effectiveness of middle schooling reforms as a response to concerns with the education of young adolescents continues (Cobbold, 2005; Dowden, 2007; Jacobs, 2010).

2.15 Global and National Trends and Perspectives on Underachievement

As noted earlier, academic underachievement possesses multiple definitions and can be viewed as a subsidiary of many other emergent and established fields of educational concern, such as the education of the gifted and talented, boys' education, students from cultural minorities, second language speakers (Colker 2011; Jha & Kelleher, 2006; Van Tassel-Baska, 2005) and students from low socio-economic or disadvantaged backgrounds (Garrick & Keogh, 2010; Louden et al., 2003; Luke et al, 2003). There may also be, in different understandings and among groups and systems, a conflation of meaning of underachievement with low achievement (Gorard & Smith, 2004) or with students with learning barriers or disabilities (Louden et al., 2000). Furthermore, given the extensive range of groups this term might be applied to, it might be expected that internationally, OECD nations and influential nations such as the United States and the United Kingdom hold a range of perspectives on underachievement that drive many of their educational policies and programs. Both in the US and the UK, as has occurred in Australia, underachievement has become the underlying theme or thread of a large range of programs that follow a systemic or targeted approach to addressing school or system failure or underachievement without necessarily labelling it as such (Gonski, 2011; Louden et al., 2000; OECD, 1998).

Thus, programs and policies may address major reform within schools or systems (systemic) such as curriculum reform (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003; Paechter, 2000), as well as broader reform to middle years' education (Pendergast, 2016; Smyth & McInerney, 2007), changes to teacher education and professional standards (DEEWR, 2013) and changes to funding (Gonski, 2011; Smith, 2005). Alternatively, they may target individual and remedial concerns which are targeted at identifying and supporting groups meeting specific criteria such as ethnic minority groups, second language speakers, boys in education (Gorard & Smith, 2004), students with learning disabilities and others (Jones & Myhill, 2010). In the US, these include legislative acts such as *No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2002* (US Department of Education, 2017), a focus on programs supporting substantial reform within the middle years of education (Carr et al., 1991; McCall et al., 1992; Pendergast, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007) and increased literacy and numeracy outcomes for targeted groups of underachieving youth from Hispanic or African American backgrounds (Jones & Myhill, 2010).

The UK has cycled through a series of models of reform targeting different themes and groups over recent decades (from the 1970's onwards) including girls' underachievement, socio-economic disadvantage, minority cultural groups and, predominantly, boys' underachievement (Jones & Myhill, 2010; Lindsay & Muijs, 2006). The recent emphasis on boys' underachievement has been challenged by many educators as presenting a 'moral panic' that represents a dominant discourse in UK education but one that is misrepresentative of what occurs within schools and systems (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Jones & Myhill, 2010; Lindsay & Muijs, 2006; Moreau, 2011; Smith, 2005). Some educators claim that underachievement has

been inaccurately conflated with low achievement and question whether boys' underachievement, or even underachievement can be said to exist other than as an abstract noun (Gorard & Smith, 2004, Smith 2005). These authors have suggested that it may be timely and pertinent to find new and more accurate terms for the range of phenomena that are currently labelled underachievement, as well as to target resources and policy reform more specifically to groups who consistently demonstrate low levels of achievement (Gorard & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2005). This may be a valid point, but for the classroom teacher and the parent, academic underachievement may indeed describe or encapsulate a meaningful phenomenon, an assessment of a student's level of attainment measured against an external standard (Apple, 2006) or normed within a specific age or year group.

Within Australia, until recently, policies, perspectives and programs have appeared to have followed similar trends of thought and theme, and until the introduction of the recent Gonski 2.0 funding reform (Doyle, 2017), without the rigorous policy driving funding such as NCLB in the US (Elkins & Poed, 2011; Lindsay & Muijs, 2006; US Department of Education, 2017). Policies and reform since the 1960s have centred on broad social justice themes and issues, including poverty and disadvantage, girls' education, boys' education, multiculturalism and disability and inclusion (Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, & Henry, 1997). From an initial focus on viewing such concerns from a deficit perspective resulting in resources and policies created to 'fix' students and families, the perspectives of government bodies, and policy leaders have increased to support and promote school and system reforms on a broader social scale (Gonski, 2011; Hattie, 2012; Taylor et al., 1997).

The staged introduction of the Australian Curriculum in 2008 (Toner, 2013) by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), ensured a that standardised curriculum was implemented across all states and territories in Australia for the first time in Australian schooling history for students from early years to Year 12 (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority hereafter ACARA, 2015). This major reform within the Australian education system allowed the development and implementation of national age and stage level standards designed to measure student achievement levels within eight key learning areas and across six separate learning stages (ACARA, 2015). Perhaps for the first time within Australian schools, all teachers could access national standards to measure student achievement that did not vary from state to state or within school and system and ensured a necessary continuity of learning outcomes (Apple, 2006) and achievement levels for all Australian students.

A significant purpose behind the introduction of middle years' reforms and models of practice (discussed earlier in section 2.14) was to ameliorate transitional concerns and to strengthen student engagement in Year 7 and 8 by addressing key issues for young adolescents. These included alienation, low achievement and underachievement, disconnection to curricula and pedagogies offered within schools, concerns for schools and systems including widespread failure, disaffection from schooling in general and low achievement in literacy, numeracy and other academic outcomes on a local and a national scale (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2016).

The drive to explore middle years' practices as a remedy for increased disengagement and alienation within the early years of secondary school, was

supported by bodies such as MCEETYA, with findings and perspectives presented in a range of reports from states and systems from the early 1990s onwards (Chadbourne, 2001; Cummings & Cormack, 1996; Dowden, 2007; Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). A recent example of a successful state reform instituted within Queensland was the *Flying Start Program* (Pendergast, 2016), involving the transfer of Year 7 students from primary to secondary school, and which included the introduction of a Junior Secondary focus on young adolescents (Pendergast, 2016). Systemic reform beyond state curriculum initiatives, was driven by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2015), (Elkins & Poed, 2011) and the *Review of Funding for Schooling Report* (Gonski, 2011). The overall success of such reforms in addressing many of these challenges will take some time and further research to establish.

2.15.1 Catholic policy and programs

Catholic educational policies and programs in Australia generally have supported and shadowed national and state policies and programs. Major reform initiatives such as the Australian Curriculum have been promptly unpacked and explored through systemic and independent schools within the Catholic system, supported and led by Catholic Education Offices of the various diocese within Australian states and territories (TCEO, 2012b). Catholic values reflect gospel values (TCEO, 2008), while Catholic primary beliefs embrace the principles of social justice (Taylor et al., 1997), and inclusion (Elkins & Poed, 2011). Explicit Catholic values outlined within Catholic educational documents have highlighted respect,

integrity, inclusiveness, justice, life-long learning and the dignity of the individual (TCEO, 2012a). Government policies and funding initiatives underpinned by broad social justice concerns or which promote inclusion, acknowledgement of diversity and areas of social disadvantage commensurate with Catholic stated values, have been readily adopted by Catholic schools and systems and integrated into a Catholic educational platform and ethos which has underpinned the most recent Catholic system reform agenda (TCEO, 2008, 2012b).

Catholic schools generally catered to a diverse range of students and families from a range of backgrounds and socio-economic status and diverse student abilities. The Tasmanian Catholic Education system undertook to roll out and implement the Australian Curriculum within primary and secondary schools within the recommended time-frame (TCEO, 2012b). It also supported a middle years' focus, with a view to investigating and implementing reform in curriculum and pedagogy among secondary schools, and strengthening links between primary and secondary schooling, and improving transition processes (TCEO, 2012b). While the introduction of the Australian Curriculum was a national educational mandate for all states and sectors, the focus on improving transitions between primary and secondary school had also been identified as a perceived need by the Catholic School sector (Towns, 2011).

As such, Catholic schools, offices and systems employed programs and initiatives that addressed educational issues of concern, such as the inclusion and support of minority groups, or targeted students from areas of disadvantage or marginalised or minority groups such as low socio-economic status (SES) groups and students with a variety of challenges and barriers. These included students

who were disengaged, struggled with literacy and numeracy attainment, and with disability or learning difficulties (TCEO, 2008). The national programs and agendas fitted well within Catholic values and principles in general (TCEO, 2012a), although within individual schools and communities, tensions have existed between the broad principles promoted at the system and mission level and individual practice in schools and classrooms. State and territory Catholic Education offices, including the Brisbane and Northern Territory Catholic Education Offices have, in the main, supported middle years' educational reform agenda (Brennan et al., 2004).

Currently Australian Curriculum standards dominate the national educational landscape. These overall system goals, and benchmarks have influenced local, state and national standards and have been reinforced and supported by national benchmark literacy and numeracy assessments such as NAPLAN. Schools are encouraged in these practices by government emphasis on overall outcomes, competitive funding programs and widespread media attention on system, state and school annual outcomes and results (Elkins & Poed, 2011). Historically, even while teachers espoused student or learner-centred models of practice, or specific learning theories, many were subtly influenced or overtly encouraged by system goals and operational procedures to make subject curriculum knowledge central to their learning program (Luke et al., 2003). Rather than adopting a learner-centred learning model, with curriculum being negotiated and adapted around the learning needs of the individual student (Beane, 2013; Campbell, Faulkner & Pridham, 2010; Dowden, 2007; Richardson, 2003), the focus in many schools was on ensuring all students within the learning group or year

level cohort achieve year and stage benchmarks and outcomes determined by state and national systems (Elkins & Poed, 2011).

2.15.2 Tasmanian policy and programs

An example of these competing demands can be found within the Tasmanian Catholic school system, which, among others, explicitly outlined a 'learner at the centre' within its Learning Platform and other related policies (TCEO, 2012b). This statement underpinned the learning programs offered in all Tasmanian Catholic schools, primary and secondary alike. However, Tasmanian Catholic schools were also mandated to implement the Australian Curriculum (TCEO, 2012a) and, as such, required to conform to national and state guidelines and parameters regarding standards of achievement (Elkins & Poed, 2011). The Tasmanian Catholic Education Office (TCEO) had, at times, enthusiastically adopted and promoted aspects of middle years schooling over the previous decade using a learning community approach, with key teachers and leaders within twice yearly network meetings (TCEO, 2008). Related to the drive for curriculum reform within both state and Catholic school sectors was a strong push from the Catholic sector for improved identification of learning needs in Year 7 and the ability to target and support students achieving below national benchmarks due to literacy and numeracy performance or other barriers (TCEO, 2012a).

However, the Tasmanian focus on the development of policy towards middle years was categorised as either 'silent' or by an approach described as "no enabling or disenabling strategy or 'naming' of middle years "(Luke et al., 2003, p. 75). Recent reform developments in Tasmanian Catholic schools promoting the

adoption of the Australian Curriculum in all schools- Foundation to Year 12- have seen the middle years' agenda subsumed into the overall focus on school-wide curriculum development and transformation throughout the Tasmanian Catholic educational system (TCEO, 2012a).

2.16 Teacher Perspectives and Practices

For teachers working with Catholic secondary schools, professional values have been shaped, to some extent by Catholic systemic values and ethos. Nevertheless, teacher perspectives on teaching the underachieving and/or disengaged student have reflected many influences, beliefs and values accumulated from a variety of personal and professional educational experiences, backgrounds and contexts. The ground-breaking work of Hattie (2012) highlighted the significance of teacher beliefs and perspectives around teaching and learning, linking these clearly with effective practice.

This study claims that teacher perspectives, including those around their constructions of underachievement, have an impact and influence on teacher identification and support of underachieving, disengaged and low achieving students (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Fredericks et al., 2004). Furthermore, teacher practices may have a significant influence in student outcomes (Archenbault, Janosz, & Chounard, 2012; Blumenfeld, 1992; Hattie, 2012; Tadich et al., 2007). Teacher qualities and practices such as a focus on warm relationships, pedagogical caring (Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2017), a democratic style in the classroom and on student-centred learning, may be particularly appropriate for young adolescents in secondary school (Cornelius-White, 2007; Smyth & McInerney,

2007; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2017). Other effective pedagogies which encourage deep understanding, development of metacognitive and critical thinking and connecting classroom learning to the wider community have also been linked with effective teaching for young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Beswick, Swabey & Andrews, 2008; Chadbourne, 2001; Dowden, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006; Luke et al., 2003; Shanks & Dowden, 2013).

However, working with underachieving young adolescents can be a challenging and difficult business for the classroom teacher (Smyth & McInerney, 2007). How the individual teacher responds to such students can, in part, be explained by an interaction between the individual teacher's perspectives and their perceptions, beliefs and values, including how the teacher constructs or frames professional identity (Fredericks, et al., 2004; Shanks & Dowden, 2013) and its accompanying set of skills and practices (Attard, 2011; Dowden, 2012b; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Teacher perspectives may also include implicit assumptions about different achievement levels for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, minority groups and those with special learning needs (Archenbault, et al., 2012). For example, teachers may possess lower expectations for achievement for students who come from backgrounds of disadvantage and/or lower socio-economic groups, based on implicit (and not always acknowledged) beliefs around social class (Archenbault et al., 2012; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Fredericks et al., 2004) or innate ability (Dweck, 1999; 2006).

Teachers embracing middle years' models of practice will underpin and structure their professional practice with specific learning theories and practices. These include team teaching, working collaboratively with colleagues and

communicating with parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jacobs, 2010), and using specific curricula and pedagogies that engage young adolescents (Cummings & Cormack, 1996; Dowden, 2007; Shanks & Dowden, 2013; Wentzel, 1998). Teachers using middle years' practices will promote supportive relationships with their students and create and develop learner-centred curriculums that focus on deep understanding of topics, higher order thinking, and learning that is connected to the world that young adolescents inhabit, both in and out of school (Attard, 2008; Dowden, 2007, 2012b; Main, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2013; Wiggins & McTighe, 2001).

A secondary school teacher, who has identified with and endeavours to build their professional repertoire of practice around the principles above, may view the engagement and achievement by students in his or her class, through the lens of the middle years' model (Dowden, 2007; Elsworth et al., 2004). Such a teacher may have a social constructivist perspective on underachieving students in the classroom. Rather than viewing academic underachievers from an individual deficit model (as outlined in this chapter through various previous examples), the teacher using middle years' practices may view students as actors with some agency, particularly in the context of educating young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007. He or she may acknowledge that young adolescents often present as alternatively resistant, passive or disengaged but will recognise that these behaviours and attitudes may be shaped and influenced by social constructions and system agendas, including their own perspectives, (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Pendergast et al., 2005). Teachers who have their professional identity and accompanying practices rigorously grounded within an informed middle years'

model, are less likely to take a deficit approach with academic underachievers. Such teachers will work to understand the educational and social context such students operate within (Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2013) and offer curricula (Dowden, 2007) and pedagogy (Pendergast, 2016) that maximises the ability for young adolescents from differing contexts and abilities to connect to and engage with learning. Teachers embracing middle schooling models of practice attempt to create and develop appropriate curriculum and pedagogy directed at engaging all young adolescent learners in their classroom (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016; Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Tadich et al., 2007). These teachers may also believe that some of the challenges with teaching young adolescents do not necessarily occur because of the teacher's lack of competency or personal professional practices. Teachers using a middle years' model will examine their perspectives including their beliefs and assumptions about expectations around students from backgrounds of disadvantage and low achievement (Shanks & Dowden, 2015). They may retain a more optimistic and positive perspective about their own practice and competencies and how these can be improved (Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

Whether teachers subscribe to middle years' models and philosophies or subscribe to varying models of effective practice, teacher perceptions and perspectives can and do appear to impact on and influence student academic performance and engagement (Hattie, 2012). Teachers do this through holding high expectations for student achievement and through a sense of professional competence and self-efficacy (Archenbault et al., 2012; Carr et al., 1991). Teachers holding low expectations for students they identify as disengaged, demonstrating

low achievement and/or coming from contexts of disadvantage such as low socio-economic background, may offer less support to the underachieving students in their classrooms (Archenbault et al., 2012; Bempechat et al., 2011; Skilling, 2014). This could result in a reduced use of a pedagogically caring approach (Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Wentzel, 1997), reduced monitoring of students and their work, and cooler or more neutral relationships with underachieving students (Wentzel, 1997; Wentzel et al., 2017). Teachers who are less confident in their own professional competency and in the abilities of their students may offer curriculum that is inappropriate, either too challenging for their students or not challenging enough (Cornelius-White, 2007). They tend to hold low expectations for work completion and engagement or participation in general (Bempechat et al., 2011; Skilling, 2014).

2.17 Student Perceptions and Perspectives

Young adolescent beliefs about schools and teachers form a significant influence over academic outcomes, although research findings suggest that these influences are not as strong as parent and peer influences (Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2017). However, the literature is conclusive regarding the significance of positive relationships between teachers and young adolescents or students in the middle years and the link between this and student engagement, overall academic outcomes and satisfaction with schooling (Cornelius-White, 2007; Pendergast et al., 2005; Schulz & Rubel, 2011). Appropriate, respectful and warm relationships between teachers and students form a central tenet of effective teacher practice for young adolescents (Pendergast & Danby, 2011; Redmond et al., 2016; Tadich et al.,

2007). Studies suggest that student beliefs about teachers and effective practice are that 'good teachers' are teachers who care and who demonstrate warmth and flexibility in their relations with students (Cornelius-White, 2007). Caring teachers are friendly and democratic in their approach towards student learning (Wentzel, 1997). They follow up on homework and assessment and provide constructive feedback on learning (Bempechat et al., 2011). They convey high expectations for both learning and behaviour that are, nevertheless, personalised to allow for individual student preferences and backgrounds (Hattie, 2012; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

A significant part of the education of young adolescents is 'student voice' (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012; Pendergast, 2016). Students who are given a voice and a stake hold in their education and the ability to reflect on and influence their own learning experiences may become more engaged, productive and independent learners. 'Student voice' may provide a lens or tool that facilitates the transmission of effective learning between student and teacher (Mitra et al., 2012). Thus, students provide us with an intimate and realistic understanding of the impact of curriculum and pedagogical processes from the ground up. Mitra noted that "Students want autonomy, relevant pedagogy, respect and collaboration, and greater responsibility in school decisions", (cited in Savrock, 2008).

An equally important factor of student belief and attributions is linked to personal motivation, learning behaviours and self-regulation (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2009). The differing responses by students to academic failure or achievement and the influence of teacher quality may be

further explained by the findings of Dweck, (1999; 2006), whose work on growth and fixed mindsets was discussed previously in section 2.7.3. Student perceptions that learning can be improved through effort and persistence, or conversely, their perceptions that academic failure confirmed a fixed ability, or intelligence may hold a significant influence over long term academic achievement or underachievement (Bernard, 2006; Dweck, 2006; Eccles & Roeser, 2003; Romero et al., 2014). Self-regulation and motivation can instil a desire to persist with tasks and activities, even when these are challenging, and enable students to risk failure while attempting the task (Blumenfeld, 1992). Students beliefs about self-efficacy, combined with perceptions on effective learning strategies contribute to their engagement and overall academic achievement (Bernard, 2006; Sullivan et al.,2009). As noted by Bempechat et al., (2011) in their study on beliefs and perceptions of students from low socio-economic status, both teacher beliefs regarding student achievement and students' self-efficacy and self-regulation contributed to high or low achievement within the group. Students needed to believe that teachers cared and that they would monitor, regulate and notice that homework was completed and class content learned. However, even when students perceived that teachers had low expectations, high achieving students demonstrated more self-efficacy and self-regulation. They persisted with tasks, worked on homework and demonstrated more engagement overall (Bempechat et al., 2011; Sullivan et al., 2009).

While teacher quality clearly did impact on student behaviour and motivation (Redmond et al., 2016), high achieving students achieved sound outcomes despite poor quality teaching (Bempechat et al., 2011). These findings

support the contention by Wentzel (1998) who noted that teacher quality and behaviour was not as significant to overall educational outcomes and engagement with schooling as that of the parent, family and peer. Nevertheless, those teachers perceived as caring, democratic, flexible, supportive and holding high but achievable expectations by their students maintained a significant influence over academic outcomes and engagement with young adolescents (Hattie, 2012; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Wentzel, 1997, 1998; Wentzel et al., 2017) and with students in general (Cornelius-White, 2007; Santrock, 2008).

2.18 Conclusion and Gap in the Research

This chapter has outlined the scope of the problem and explored the various contexts that comprise this multi-dimensioned topic. The review has highlighted various gaps in the literature including the need for further research inquiring into establishing who is the young adolescent academic underachiever; how teachers identify these students; and, the practices teachers use to support these students once they have been identified. The literature review discussed educational reforms brought in by schools and systems to address academic underachievement, literacy and numeracy achievement gaps, and disengagement from schooling. These include the use of middle years' models of practice by some schools and systems, which target the achievement gaps and transition difficulties of young adolescents (Bahr, 2010; Dowden, 2007; Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Pendergast, 2010, 2016). As such, the scope of the chapter has included a broad range of themes and issues related to the topic, including global and national perspectives on underachievement, disengagement from schooling, transitions from primary to

secondary schooling and middle years' models of practice. The review has also given emphasis to the scope and time-frame for these concerns, which have existed for several decades, or, like the term 'underachievement', have been absorbed into other agendas or programs, while remaining a serious issue today for students, parents, teachers, schools and communities.

For the secondary school teacher, the academic achievement and general progression and growth in learning of the students they teach is the fundamental goal and purpose of teaching (Hattie, 2012). For the young adolescent, being able to connect to, understand and participate in the learning presented in the classroom is a crucial component of their academic progression. Failure to do this may result in reduced opportunities for the student that extend into future years beyond secondary schooling (Abbott-Chapman, 2015; Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Stuart, 1989). Furthermore, within this study, it has been purported that teacher beliefs and perspectives may influence teacher identification and practice and have a pervasive influence on the outcomes for young adolescent academic underachievers (Bempechat et al., 2011; Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Fredericks et al., 2004; Hattie, 2012; Luke et al., 2003). The study therefore seeks to address the gaps between policy, programs and teacher practice that currently exist in the literature exploring the many and various agendas that surround young adolescent academic achievers and the teachers who teach them.

2.19 Summary of the Chapter

Underachievement among secondary students has been identified as presenting a complex challenge for schools, systems, individuals and communities

within both local and global contexts (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke et al., 2003; MCEETYA, 2008). This phenomenon is complicated by the definition of underachievement being multi-dimensional or multi-modal (Fredericks et al., 2004; Gorard & Smith, 2004; Krause & Krause, 1981, Reis & McCoach, 2000), and being associated with and encompassing aspects of low achievement, disengagement and learning difficulties (Louden et al., 2000), including students from a wide range of contexts and backgrounds (Colker 2011; Jha & Kelleher, 2006; Van Tassel-Baska, 2005). This literature review focused on the young adolescent who has demonstrated a consistently lower expected trend of achievement against expected standards in secondary school. Additionally, the chapter has explored some of the factors found in the first two years of secondary school that add further complexity to the topic, including middle years' educational reforms, and trends influencing learning outcomes and academic attainment (Pendergast, 2010, 2016: Redmond et al., 2016; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

Underachievement has been noted as particularly prevalent in Year 7 and 8 (Dinham & Rowe, 2008; Griffin, 1988; MCEETYA, 2008; OECD, 1998). This has been linked, in part, to the challenge of transitioning from primary to high school and differences between academic expectations, teacher relationships and student engagement (Benner, 2011; Chadbourne, 2001; Elsworth et al., 2004). Generalised lower performance in literacy and numeracy trends of achievement for large numbers of students have also been noted across the board (Freebody, 2007; Luke et al., 2003). Intrinsically related and connected to the multiple layers and components of underachievement are the perceptions, perspectives and practices found among the teachers who work at the coalface with individual underachieving

students in their classrooms. Research has suggested that teacher beliefs and perspectives may influence how they identify and support underachieving young adolescents (Dunne & Gazeley, 2007; Hattie 2012). The chapter has discussed the many complexities and varied challenges inherent in the education of young adolescents in general. In so doing, the chapter has outlined the need to shed further light on teacher perceptions of underachievement and young adolescents' learning needs, to further clarify teacher perspectives and practice when working with academic underachievers in the classroom setting.

Chapter 3 Methodology discusses the methodologies used within the study in detail, including the type of study, the methodological framework, the epistemology underpinning the study and the specific methods, tools and instruments used to gather data. The chapter provides the case context, collection of ethical permissions, recruitment processes and samples. The chapter outlines the methods used for collecting data for each of the three major data sets, discussing tools, samples and specific methods for each set individually.

Chapter 3: Methodology

We cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting to let something be said…Understanding does not occur when we try to intercept what someone wants to say to us by claiming we already know it (Hans Georg Gadamer, cited in Cazeaus, 2000, p77).

3.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter begins by outlining the type, scope and nature of the study, which seeks to describe and interpret teacher perspectives, perceptions and practice when identifying and supporting adolescent academic underachievers in a selection of secondary schools in Northern Tasmania. The chapter then explores the interpretive/ social constructionist paradigm (Crotty, 1998) that forms the philosophical backbone or epistemology of the case study and determines the multi-level nature of this research. Next, the chapter expands on the different methodological models used for gathering, processing and interpreting the data used within the study topic. The chapter continues by defining the characteristics of the research topic (Creswell, 2013), including the three primary research questions, the research setting, participants, study parameters and ethical considerations and permissions. The chapter then provides further detail on the specific processes and methods used within the study for each separate set of data, including descriptions of study samples, recruitment of participants, data gathering processes, validity and reliability issues, interpretations and presentation of discussions.

3.2 Construction and Scope of the Study

This study was organised and presented as an explanatory mixed methods educational study using a collective case study structure (Creswell, 2005; Hesse-Biber, 2010; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). The study design or overarching theoretical research paradigm was underpinned by a social constructionist philosophy or worldview as posited by Crotty (1998) and Berger and Luckmann (1991). This theoretical position, emanating from the discipline of sociology, proposes that knowledge and meaning is nuanced, multi-layered phenomena; a social construction created by individuals and groups (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Holroyd, 2007; Laverty, 2003). As such, it is situated within and informed by cultural, historical and personal contexts (Laverty, 2003).

This study included data from a range of regional secondary schools from Northern Tasmania, with a specific focus on data obtained from Catholic school teachers[2]. The topic of the study investigated how teachers identify and address student underachievement in Year 7 and 8. The following research questions underpinned the study:

R1. What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?

R2. What factors do young adolescents identify as significant to their learning?

[2] Throughout the study, teachers have been referred to as secondary school teachers rather than middle years' teachers. While teacher participants in the third data set taught predominantly students in Year 7 and 8, and all participant responses were based on their experiences teaching young adolescents in Year 7 and 8, teacher responses did not indicate that they identified themselves as primarily or exclusively as middle years' teachers in a professional capacity.

R3. What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?

These three questions formed the main subject of the explanatory mixed methods case study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

3.3 Epistemology: Interpretive Social Constructionism/Constructivism

The theoretical background and context for this study has used, broadly stated, an interpretive constructivist/constructionist paradigm (Crotty, 1998; Laverty, 2003). As a form of pragmatism, constructivism centres on how people "develop narratives and explanations which enable them not only to operate viably in their everyday lives, but also to participate in the habits and customs of the group they are members of "(Larochelle, 1999, p. 6).

The specific worldview that underpins the study fits within an interpretive framework using a constructivist/social constructionist 'lens' or perspective, which is premised on the understanding that our conceptions of reality are interpretations that rely on individual, group or social constructions of knowledge. The nuanced differences between constructivism and social constructivism are noted below:

1. Constructivism tends to denote an individual construction or interpretation of meaning (Crotty, 1998). It can also be used to denote a learning theory which posits that individuals construct meaning based on an interchange between what they already know and understand and new knowledge or phenomena they observe (Richardson, 2003).

2. Social constructionist precepts posit that common-sense reality, as experienced by individuals and groups, consists of multiple layers or constructions of meanings, actions and events. These are interpretations of phenomena which are influenced by social and historical contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Holroyd, 2007; Laverty, 2003). Social constructionism is pragmatic, responsive, interpretive and grounded in language and symbols (Andrews, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Crotty, 1998).

Constructivism posits that people construct knowledge, understanding and meaning, and act on these understandings, based on their interpretations of the world and events in the world, as they simultaneously both experience and interpret it (Crotty, 1998). As such, common sense knowledge and understanding are social constructions that are fluid rather than fixed, and are formed and informed by background factors, historical situations, the interpretations of participants and groups constructing the knowledge, and by interaction with the phenomena occurring within the specific context (Laverty, 2003).

Social constructionism has been criticised for its ontological relativism that some proponents of constructionism have extended to all forms of knowledge and understanding (Crotty, 1998). Alternatively, other critics have noted that social constructionism forms an epistemological approach towards its subject (Andrews, 2012) rather than a genuine ontology. Thus, social constructionism is more occupied with exploring inquiries that centre on how knowledge may be constructed and the circumstances leading to the

construction rather than what knowledge consists of or any essential forms or representations it may take (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Furthermore, as outlined by Andrews (2012), social constructionists take moderate stances in many instances. Qualitative studies in education or social sciences may use a social constructionist theoretical perspective, limiting the scope of this theory to specific inquiries that focus on exploring social phenomena occurring around human activities, institutions and interactions. Additionally, Crotty makes a further distinction between social constructionism and constructivism (1998). This distinction suggests that as constructivism can be identified as an individualistic interpretation of phenomena or events, while social constructionism prioritises a collective interpretation, "constructivism tends to resist the critical spirit while constructionism tends to follow it" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58).

This distinction and potential area for a theoretical form of dissonance has been addressed within this study in two ways:

1. Privileging participants' personal interpretations during the data collection and processing in a constructivist and non-critical manner in line with an interpretive phenomenological approach.
2. Taking a social constructionist stance when considering the major themes emerging from the different case studies and overall data.

Within this study, constructivism has also been used to denote and define a specific educational approach and philosophy of teaching and learning that falls within the purview of middle schooling precepts (Richardson, 2003). This use of the term constructivism has been discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.9.

In summary, a key purpose of this study was to explore how teachers identify and address academic underachievement, exploring how teacher perceptions and perspectives influenced their practice. A secondary purpose considered the challenges and strategies that students identified as significant in their first year of secondary school. As such, the study makes a claim that teacher constructions of student underachievement and their perspectives around underachieving students may be multiple and fluid interpretations that emerge from personal and local, as well as cultural, social and historical contexts. Likewise, student constructions of the challenges and strategies they identify as significant in Year 7 may also be fluid, local and bound within a specific context. Within this collective case study, findings may also be informed by and representative of local contexts, personal beliefs, constructions and factors, rather than general trends representing fixed categories or understandings that outline predominantly professional discourses and beliefs (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

The study presents the findings of the three data sets, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, to provide a perspective that informs and illuminates motifs and themes emerging from the broader topic of student underachievement within young adolescents at secondary school. The study could be compared to shining a light and a microscope on a small piece of tapestry to closely examine in finer detail the patterns, threads and the emerging themes. These details provided at the micro-level may be overlooked when considering the whole tapestry. However, they may provide a rich amount of detail about the construction, the contextual factors and the techniques and

practices stemming from the local context that inform and contribute to a richer understanding of the bigger picture.

3.4 Pragmatics of Study Design

The study design and processes implemented to collect data were reiterative, reflexive and tentative, following a circular process or spiral like those outlined by Gadamer (1985). Holroyd (2007) noted that these methods strengthen and support interpretive and qualitative data collection and processing. Additionally, the study design and processes for collecting, processing and interpreting data reflected the complexity of the study topic and philosophical underpinnings of the themes and concepts being explored. As Laverty (2003) claimed:

> the interpretivist framework of inquiry supports the ontological perspective of the belief in the existence of not just one reality, but of multiple realities that are constructed and can be altered by the knower. Reality is not something 'out there', but rather something that is local and specifically constructed. Realities are not more or less true, rather they are simply more or less informed (p. 13).

This approach seemed particularly appropriate to the study and research questions which, on reflection and over time, seemed ever more subjective, while a common understanding of the study's terms and definitions grew ever less definitive, even as the study progressed. Here, a developing interpretive and constructionist approach slowly emerged during the planning, collecting and interpreting of data. This allowed data to be contextualised, situated and

embedded within the study, while still considering the overall narrative or story from a broader social constructionist paradigm.

3.4.1 Hermeneutical phenomenology versus explanatory mixed methods

During the early research design stages, the design and approach first selected was a hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology seeks to illuminate and clarify a complex process or experience through a structured method of analysis that includes three key features (Kafle, 2011; Van Manen, 1990). These are:

- a contextual orientation that reflects the researcher's involvement in the life world of the participants;
- strength or rigour in the approach denoted by the emergence of core meanings or essences from the stories of participants and actors;
- richness and depth, which arise from detailed, textured and nuanced descriptions of the life worlds of participants and actors (Kafle, 2011; Van Manen, 1990).

The original study and primary methodological design was premised on this philosophical paradigm, while aspects of the data analysis were informed by the three principles outlined above. However, phenomenological philosophies that prioritised a focus on 'the universal essence' (Creswell, 2013, p.76) were not always consistent with all methodologies, instruments and approaches used throughout the study, nor, did this approach truly appear to be a representative construction of the emerging data. Using a backward, or reiterative planning model to assist with structuring the data and revision of

research questions and focal points, it became evident that this study was characterised by a pragmatic, explanatory mixed methodology, which included a diverse set of tools and instruments to collect and interpret data (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

Nevertheless, there have been some aspects of phenomenological methodologies that have continued to inform this study. Methods used to refine and process qualitative data, have retained some similarities to phenomenological data analysis methods that formed part of the original study framework and design (Aspers, 2004; Creswell, 2013). The three major themes, perceptions, perspectives and practice which link all three data sets within the study (discussed in Chapter 7), bear some resemblance to the essences found within hermeneutic phenomenology as outlined by Van Manen (1990). These emerging links fitted within the parameters of this study and did not appear to be theoretically opposed to other methodologies used to process and collect data. A further element from phenomenological studies fitting within the study design was the concept or phenomenon of the 'horizon'. A primary goal of hermeneutic phenomenological methodologies or epistemologies posited by Gadamer (1985), centres on developing an awareness of and broadening of individual and group 'horizons' within the identified phenomenon. For Gadamer, a horizon is a summary of known knowledge and understanding about a given situation. It represents something finite and limited but which can also be expanded. The horizon presents a historically informed and understood limitation that is current but not necessarily fixed:

> We define the concept of situation by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence an essential part of the concept of situation is the concept of "horizon". The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a partic vantage point (Gadamer, 1988, p. 269).

Research and participants together expand current perspectives to extend what is believed to be already understood, and is a known horizon, to a deeper understanding or an increased horizon. The employment of this specific phenomenological perspective has allowed the researcher and participants, the opportunity to explore beyond the known horizon of classifications and terminologies, and professional and personal interpretations related to underachievement, young adolescent and middle years' approaches. These include the various conceptions and constructions of young adolescence, cultural and socio-economic groups and statuses, concepts and models of underachievement and other key factors in this study. The tentative and shifting nature of the concepts and definitions above have been unpacked more fully in Chapter 2, section 2.8. As noted in Chapter 2, these concepts have proven to be a contested and complex component of the literature on the world of the young adolescent, student underachievers, and middle years' practices or constructivist pedagogies in general.

3.4.2 Organising paradigm: Collective case study

The organisation and presentation for this study follows an instrumental collective case study design, which employs an explanatory, qualitative mixed

methods approach in the gathering and interpretation of data (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Yin, 2009). Collective case studies, as noted by Yin (2009) and Stake (2005) investigate a phenomenon, research problem or inquiry from the perspectives of different stakeholders or groups coming from research sites that represent a given context. Case study design tends towards a detailed description, investigation or interrogation of the specific phenomenon or 'quintain' as it has been described by Stake (2005). As such, study results are limited in their scope for generalisation to broader contexts (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). What case studies can provide however are valuable and insightful interpretations of specific events, problems, phenomena or practices (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Thus, case studies illuminate personal and professional practices, understandings and actions surrounding events, concerns and similar. As Stake notes "the power of a case study is in its attention to the local situation, not in how it represents other cases in general" (p. 8). Findings from case studies may appeal to a range of researchers from the social sciences, humanities and various institutional and professional worlds, "case study issues reflect complex, situated problematic relationships. They pull attention both to ordinary experience, and to the disciplines of knowledge… "(Stake, 2005, p. 10).

Key elements of a qualitative case study include a focus on research questions which address themes, actions and responses to complex yet 'every day' phenomena, as opposed to the development of hypotheses (Creswell 2013). Within case studies there is the use of empirical and quantitative data, including interviews, assessment results and observations, as well as the collection of data through research literature and documents (Aspers, 2004; Yin, 2009). Collective case studies explore a phenomenon that may not be site specific but

instead can apply to a range of contexts (Yin, 2009). Case study designs may be intrinsic, where the case is a specific and isolated unique example or instrumental (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). Instrumental case studies examine a phenomenon that has the potential to be generalised or features across a range of contexts (Creswell, 2013; Stake 1995).

3.4.3 Explanatory mixed methods research in case studies

The choice of using an explanatory mixed model as the methodological approach underpinning the collective case study design developed in a large part as a response to the initial research in the study topic. This choice, essentially a pragmatic one, emerged gradually through the development of the research plan, the literature review and tentative explorations in pinning down an effective, manageable, yet authentic methodological process for collecting and interpreting data. The emergent and practical seeking of solutions to collect data addressing the primary research questions aligned well within Creswell's (2013) main tenets of pragmatism including the focus on social contexts, use of case study, multiple sources and the range of different methods and qualitative approaches. Yin (2009) noted in his seminal work on the case study that use of a mixed methods approach can allow a rich and broad range of data to be gathered.

As Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) have pointed out, mixed methods studies have become an increasingly common design in educational research. Mixed methods research studies are characterised by focus on the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from a specific research topic or question/s. The data obtained may be combined in a range of potential ways to form a study

that uses an eclectic structure, whereby each type of data informs and illuminates findings emerging in the other (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). Mixed methods studies can collect and combine the different forms of data at different stages and may also prioritise either quantitative or qualitative methods, depending on the research questions, design and methods chosen by the researcher (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The different data sets enable the triangulation of results for research findings (Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008), allowing the development of rich narratives to enhance quantitative results. The use of mixed methodologies assist to focus and direct broad topics into specific areas for a qualitative exploration (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Mixed methods research can be underpinned by any of three main research paradigms, or epistemologies: positivistic, interpretive or critical (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

3.5 Study Setting and Context

The study research site was set in Northern Tasmania, and utilised data collected from teachers employed by secondary schools in the region. Northern Tasmania can be divided into three specific regions, the North, North West and North East. Northern Tasmanian populations include approximately 143, 000 people, which is comprised of the regional capital of Launceston and surrounding areas. The North East includes the regional cities of Burnie and Devonport and surrounding areas with a combined population of just over 91,000 people (Brindley & Turner, 2015). The regional North Eastern town of Georgetown, (population of 6374), is included in ABS government statistics as one of the most regionally disadvantaged areas in the state (Brindley & Turner,

2015). For the purposes of the study, while receiving a range of invitations and follow up information and requests, it was noted that schools and teachers from Georgetown (both state and Catholic) declined to participate in the study.

There are a total 14 state secondary schools in the entire Northern Tasmanian region and four Catholic Colleges. State secondary school teachers in Northern Tasmania teach students from Year 7-10, with large senior Colleges catering for students in year 11 and 12. Three of the four Catholic Colleges include students from Year 7-12, with one College teaching students from K-10. Data were collected from participants recruited from both Catholic and State Secondary schoolteachers and a cohort of Year 7 students from one of the Catholic Colleges within the Northern region. All secondary schools in the region shared common systemic operational policies and guidelines set either by the Tasmanian Department of Education or Tasmanian Catholic Education Office (TCEO, 2012a). Both Catholic and State schoolteachers from the region were non-selective schools, servicing families from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (ACARA, 2015).

The study utilised three stages of data collection resulting in three main data sets:

1. Questionnaire completed by 34 Catholic and State Secondary School teachers from the region (R1 & R3).
2. Reflection Sheet completed by 178 Year 7 students from a regional Catholic College (R2): and,

3. A series of semi-structured interviews completed by 12 teacher participants from predominantly Catholic school sites in the region (R1 & R3).

Appendices A-J provide samples of all instruments used in the study.

Table 3.1 outlines key characteristics for schools, teachers and students participating in the study. Catholic Colleges were provided with a pseudonym to provide anonymity regarding any specific references within the study. This was not necessary to implement for participants working within state schools, as there were no direct references to individual research sites. State school and Catholic College participants who completed questionnaires for the first data set were identified via a letter from the alphabet. Student and teacher participants who provided data for the remaining data sets were given a pseudonym as identifiers.

Table 3.1

School and Setting Characteristics

SCHOOLS	CHARACTERISTICS	DATA	OTHER
Fidelis College	Catholic College 7-12 Northern Tasmania	Teacher Questionnaires Teacher Interviews	Coeducational Independent
Constantius College	Catholic College 7-12 Northern Tasmania	Teacher Questionnaires Teacher Interviews Student Reflections	Coeducational Independent Year 7 Cohort
Caritas College	Catholic College 7-12 Northern Tasmania	Teacher Questionnaires Teacher Interviews	Coeducational Independent
State Schools	Secondary Schools 7-10 Northern Tasmania	Teacher Questionnaires Teacher Interview	Coeducational State School System

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study began as a phenomenological qualitative study. The original research design focused on gathering data describing teacher understandings, beliefs, practices and pedagogical processes. Initially, the aims of the study were to gather data from teachers employed in Catholic Colleges. Accordingly, ethical approval was sought from the *Human Research Ethics Committee (Tasmania)* by applying to the Social Science HREC. A request was also submitted to the Director of Tasmanian Catholic Education to seek systemic permission to conduct the study in Catholic Schools. Once approval to recruit participants and collect data was granted from the HREC and the Director of Catholic Education, permission was then sought from Principals of the four Catholic Colleges within the region. This was obtained by contacting the Principals in person and the emailing of an explanatory letter, which included outlines and intentions of the study, ethical permission notes, information letters, informed consent notes and a copy of the questionnaire (see Appendices A-J). Principals were invited to read this material prior to granting permission and circulating the provided materials to all teaching staff within the Colleges.

Data collection for this mixed methods study included quantitative data from questionnaires initially circulated only to the regional Catholic Colleges. When uptake for participation proved to be limited, participation in the study was extended to State Schools and Colleges. As research methodology modifications were made to the study design to assist with data collection as

well as to recruit teachers from state schools, further ethical approvals and adjustments were sought through the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). A separate ethics application was also submitted to the Department of Education, Tasmania, seeking permission to circulate questionnaires to teachers in the state secondary schools. Permission was also sought for the amendments from the HREC Ethical Board and from the Principal of Constantius College to use data obtained from a student questionnaire and workshop. These further applications delayed the collection of data until formal approvals were received for all modifications. After consideration, the HREC and the Department of Education granted formal approvals (see Appendix C).

The process of seeking approval to distribute questionnaires and gather data from schools, Colleges and all participants commenced only after the HREC adjustments and Education Department approvals were formally granted. The Department of Education required the researcher to seek individual approval from state school Principals. Thus, questionnaires, information letters and privacy forms were sent out to state schools, while individual permission to approach teachers was sought through letters and information about the nature of the study sent to all state school Principals in the region.

3.6.1 Privacy considerations

Further consideration was given to the understanding that both teacher and student participants from both Catholic and State education systems might reveal data and information that could be perceived as a conflict of interest. This could include opinions, views and practices that might conflict with the

concerns of their employing organisation or impact on relationships with colleagues or teachers. Thus, participant privacy and anonymity was essential to the collection of data for this project, as a key aspect of the provision of professional and personal respect from researcher to participants (Denholm & Evans, 2006). No photographic or personal data were collected from participants or their students. All participants remained anonymous and information obtained was de-identified, while participants who provided qualitative data were given code identifiers. No teachers completing questionnaires or interviews were employed by Constantius College (the researcher's place of employment) during the period of research, nor were they in any direct capacity able to be influenced by the researcher. This addressed ethical concerns regarding an imbalance of power that could influence the gathering of the data or the participant's wellbeing or employment prospects. All participants received information about the study and its purposes, secure data storage plus informed consent forms, and privacy statements as outlined above. Copies of ethical approval and permission letters have been included in Appendix C and G.

3.6.2 Challenges with data collection

Collecting the data presented its own unforeseen challenges related to access to research sites and gaining participant trust. As a teacher and professional working within the region and educational system, doors were open in a professional sense. However, as a researcher, even guided by strong ethical boundaries and permissions, gaining access to these same sites and

potential participants was not as straightforward. Obtaining data from teacher colleagues, direct reports and students within both Catholic Colleges and state secondary schools, raised ethical concerns concerning power imbalances and working with vulnerable populations. These factors also impacted on the evolution of the study design and data collection procedures and left their impact on the overall methods used within the study. While the study's underpinning approach was reflective of an interpretive epistemology, the design and methods were pragmatic (Creswell, 2005; Creswell, 2013). These were selected for their ability to shed a focused light on the research topic, and with an awareness of the operational complexities within the research sites and sensitivities surrounding the topic of student underachievement in secondary school.

The online questionnaire was initially circulated to all teachers employed by three of the four Colleges in the region; approximately 55-60 teachers. One school in the region, Constantius College, was excluded from participation in the teacher questionnaire, for ethical reasons, as it was the researcher's primary employer and included the potential for a conflict of interest to arise.

Participation in the questionnaire was completely anonymous. Questionnaires were initially circulated through email letters of invitation to all participating Colleges. The email provided a link to an online instrument hosting the questionnaire. Only a very limited interest was expressed in completing the online questionnaire. Permission was then sought from the Principal of Fidelus College to directly approach teachers to complete a print version of the questionnaire during a staff meeting. After the meeting, 11 of the 34 teachers

employed by the College agreed to participate. This sample represented approximately one third of the teachers employed by the specific research site but was still a small sample for research purposes. Both email and direct requests and contacts made to Catholic Colleges and Principals had brought a limited number of responses and interest, so further permission was sought to offer the questionnaire to all teachers of Northern secondary schools.

This required additional applications to the Department of Education, Tasmania and to the Principals of all schools in the Northern region. Recruitment packages including letters of invitation, paper questionnaires, disclosure statements and reply paid envelopes were then sent to the secondary schools in the region. Responses from three Principals indicated they had received and circulated the survey to the teachers on their staff. Two further Principals responded to requests declining to participate on behalf of their schools, on the basis that teachers had been subject to multiple requests to participate in research studies and questionnaires, and the Principals believed that this request might impact unduly on teacher time and goodwill. Eventually after perseverance, quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from teachers from Fidelis College and state schools in the Northern region through the circulated questionnaire. This data formed the first data set of the study.

3.6.3 Ethical considerations related to student participants

The original study design allowed for observation visits to be included as part of the qualitative data procedures. In line with this, full ethics permission had been sought and then granted by the Ethical Board. Hence participants in the study

potentially included teacher aides and students, who formed part of the observation visits. Inclusion of this group required extra provisions to enable the safe and respectful collection of data, including removal of identifying information, storage of data, and permissions from the Principals of school research sites and teacher participants. The inclusion of these groups to the research study had been justified for reasons that the study was designed to contribute to a broader educational understanding of how teachers identify underachieving students and to ascertain strategies and practices used to support students.

The first observation visit to Fidelis College became the source of some distress to student participants in the first class who believed that the study might reflect unfairly on them, with some students questioning and objecting to the use of the words 'underachiever'. After the teacher participant from Fidelis College brought up concerns raised by the class after one interview, the decision was made to focus on teacher participants and exclude students and teacher aides from participation through observation. The study was redesigned to remove observation visits from the study design and to incorporate the voice of students through an anonymous survey completed under the direction of their teachers in the classroom. The survey's focus concentrated on eliciting the students' perspective on challenges they observed in their first year of secondary school. This survey was introduced as an open-ended reflective sheet which provided data for the second major data set. The survey was implemented as part of a process embedded within a transition workshop designed to allow students to reflect on and generate strategies about their learning in the classroom. Collecting this data required further amendments and

approvals from the Social Sciences HREC and permission from the Principal of the participating school. Once approval was granted, this data was gathered and formed the second data set.

As a key aim of the overall study was to gather detailed data from teachers working with academic underachievers, semi-structured interviews with teacher participants were designed as a third major qualitative data source. This was followed up by using a member checking process. These adjustments and the new research design assisted in the recruitment of 12 teacher participants from the Northern Catholic school sector, who were willing to participate given the new conditions. This data comprised the third and final data set for the study.

3.6.4 Summary of ethical processes

In summary, in line with ethical standards for social sciences and Education, participation in the study was entirely voluntary and all participants in case studies received information that allowed them to opt out of the study if they no longer desired to participate. No data were collected for any part of the study until formal consent was granted from the Social Sciences HREC, Department of Education, Tasmanian Catholic Education Office (TCEO) and Principals of all Catholic and state secondary schools. Additional ethical applications were made for each subsequent adjustment related to data collection, including recruitment of participants and methods used to collect data. Participants were provided with informed consent forms and disclosure statements prior to their participation in the study. All participants remained anonymous throughout the duration of the study and

subsequent publications. Data were stored by cloud technology using Google Drive and on a personal password protected laptop and a portable hard drive. Printed transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet during the duration of the study, then archived for the requisite number of years. These privacy controls formed an important part of the ethical considerations of this study.

3.7 Participant Samples

Three different participant samples were collected for the study. Each sample provided data for a specific data set and research question. For Data Set 1 and 3 the intent was to openly recruit classroom teachers from a variety of subjects, who might volunteer to be participants for the theoretical sample. For Data Set 2 data were collected from a sample of Year 7 students who attended Constantius College. Table 3.2 outlines different groups of participants included and excluded from the study.

3.7.1 Data set 1 sample: Recruitment of teacher participants.

Data for the first data set were obtained initially from teachers employed within Fidelis College. While the survey was offered to all Catholic Colleges in the region, as outlined in section 3.9 there appeared to be little interest in uptake. When a personal approach and visit was made to one of the Catholic schools, Fidelis College, eleven teachers offered to complete and return the questionnaire. As outlined in the ethical procedures, permission was then sought from the Department of Education and Principals of state secondary schools to survey state school teachers. Participants recruited to complete questionnaires needed to be teachers who had taught or were currently

teaching students in Year 7 and 8 in the region. On obtaining permission, a slightly amended copy of the questionnaire was sent out to state schoolteachers in the region. State schools were approached through two different recruitment processes. The first process targeted 14 secondary schools in total from the northern region. This process began with the circulation of an invitation to participate, information statements and an online survey. As with the initial survey offered to Catholic schoolteachers, state schoolteacher interest in the online survey was very limited, so a second recruitment process was implemented.

The email circulated to teacher participants included an *expression of interest* letter with an embedded link to the survey questionnaire, and accompanying information and consent forms. The questionnaire included an option for participants to express an interest in participating further in the project, including permission for the researcher to initiate personal contact. Participants who indicated a further interest in participating in collective case study data collection (through personal interviews) were advised to read the additional information about the study and its purposes, including the informed consent forms and privacy statements. Approaching potential participants in this way allowed Principals and teachers to be fully informed regarding the purposes, processes and outcomes of the study, and enabled them to make informed decisions about participation in line with appropriate ethical guidelines for qualitative studies.

Table 3.2 *Participant Groups Included and Excluded from the Study*

	INCLUSION	EXCLUSION
PARTICIPANTS	• Teachers of students in Year 7 & 8 in North Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges (interview & questionnaire participants). • Teachers in Northern Tasmanian State Schools (questionnaire participants). • 178 Year 7 students attending a Catholic College.	Teachers who teach students in primary years (Yr1-6). Parents of students. Teacher aides working in the classrooms of teacher participants.
FOCUS	• Students in Year 7 & 8 who do not reach year level expectations based on assessment of learning through testing, reporting and formative and summative assessment results. • Students identified by teachers as consistently disengaged learners and/or 'at risk' of failing. • Students who may consistently refuse or avoid participation in activities and assessment and whose results may be below age or year level expectations because of this.	Students who do not achieve year level outcomes due to identified disabilities and special learning needs, but who are deemed to be progressing appropriately (as outlined by IEP goals or curriculum adjustments by the teacher) Students identified as gifted and talented, who may not be achieving high results but who are consistently achieving.
DEFINITIONS	• Students who consistently do not achieve age or year level outcomes based on teacher or school assessment of ability. • Students who may or may not have an identified learning barrier-but whose achievement still appears to demonstrate a consistent gap between ability and outcomes. • Students who are identified by the teacher as disengaged learners • Students who refuse or avoid completing and/or participation in classroom learning activities and homework.	Students who do not achieve year level outcomes due to identified disabilities and special learning needs, but who are deemed to be progressing appropriately as outlined by IEP goals, or teacher adjustments to curriculum and learning program (Elkins & Poed, 2011).

While the uptake of responses for questionnaires for both groups was small, data obtained from these samples, meant that results could be compared to emerging themes from qualitative interviews within the overall study. The responses to questionnaires allowed some revision of the initial semi-structured interview protocols for interview participants. Data obtained from the questionnaires helped inform and clarify teacher identification of underachievement and to indicate strategies and practices used by teachers within the region. The data also provided a further source of evidence for triangulation of results within the overall study. Ultimately, 34 teachers from both State and Catholic schools responded positively to the letter of invitation and accompanying information packages and completed a questionnaire for the study.

3.7.2 Data Set 2 sample: Student reflection instrument.

The Year 7 students who participated in the second data set for the study attended Constantius College during the year and were just over half way through their first year of secondary school at the time. The students were from seven classes of approximately 25-28 students per class. The class construction process for Year 7 students attending Constantius College was heterogeneous, with an even gender balance, including students from a range of ability levels, backgrounds and primary schools. The students attending the College came from a range of different socio-economic backgrounds, including a small group of students classed as New Arrivals from Sudan, Ghana, Myanmar and Eritrea (ACARA, 2017).

Class achievement for literacy and numeracy data for the cohort was measured by Progressive Achievement Testing, hereafter known as PAT (ACER, 2015), provided by the Australian Council for Academic Research. The testing included PAT R (reading comprehension) and PAT Maths (mathematics) tests, which were completed online, scored by ACER and normed against a larger Australian group of Year 7 students. Students were tested at the beginning of the year in February and then again in September. PAT data for the seven classes who completed the survey was available to use as a standardised reference from the September testing completed by Constantius College. The Progressive Achievement Testing (PAT) data were reviewed to identify whether core classes appeared to be achieving within an average, lower than average or higher than average range compared to other Year 7 classes within Australian schools. Included in Appendix H is a table that outlines the collective achievement and ranking for the sample group, compared to other Australian schools using PAT data. The cohort's results scored within the average ranges for Year 7 students sitting the PAT tests across Australia. This would indicate that the Year 7 students participating in the survey would represent a statistically average sample and population of Year 7 students for Australian schools.

As outlined earlier in section 3.6, permission to use the de-identified student data were obtained from the appropriate ethical boards, the Director of Catholic Education for the region and the Principal of Constantius College. Survey data were collected from students indirectly as a culminating part of an

annual workshop held to enhance the transition of Year 7 students at Constantius College and immediately de-identified before processing.

3.7.3 Data Set 3 sample: Teacher interviews

The third data set included semi-structured interviews, taken from 12 teacher participants. The selection of participants for the interviews was made using a purposeful sampling process that was criterion-based (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative studies using purposeful sampling, Creswell (2013) noted that participants are selected based on qualities and factors deemed relevant to the study's scope and purpose. Criteria identified as relevant to the study included the following criteria: participants in case study interviews needed to be teachers who currently taught (or who had recently taught) in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Schools; taught students in Year 7 and 8; and taught, or had taught, students they considered to be underachieving. As with the questionnaire, teachers who were employed at Constantius College during the duration of the study were excluded from participation so no conflict of interest or power imbalances would occur between researcher and participants. No further criteria applied to initial volunteers for case studies.

Prospective participants were invited to make contact at the end of the questionnaire through a final message, which also provided contact details. Informed consent forms and an information letter were attached to the teacher email inviting teachers to participate in the study. This enabled potential participants to gain more information before deciding on participation and/or making contact. The initial instrument targeted around 55-60 teachers.

Teachers were invited to respond to letters through phone or email contacts. Given the very limited uptake for participation, after some time had passed with little interest being demonstrated, several potential participants were directly approached by the researcher. These potential participants were teachers who met the participant criteria outlined within the study. They worked or had recently worked in a Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary College and they taught or had recently taught Year 7 and 8 students. This approach met with more success, although timing and scheduling interviews for all participants, and gaining the trust of potential participants in the two more remote regional Colleges required a persistent approach and took a substantial amount of time and networking.

Potential participants and professional colleagues were asked to provide the names of teachers who met the criteria outlined and who might be interested in participation. This use of 'snowball sampling' techniques assisted in the recruitment of participants (Groenewald, 2004). Most participants in the collective case study agreed to participate after a personal request.

Ultimately, within the study, teachers who worked or had worked within three of the four Northern Catholic Colleges were represented. The smallest Catholic College in the region responded initially to a range of invitations for an expression of interest by the researcher but ultimately did not choose to participate in either completing questionnaires or involvement in participant interviews. All teacher participants taught students in Year 7 and 8, with some, although not all, teachers working exclusively with young adolescents in these year levels.

3.7.4 Sample size for teacher interviews

Findings for the third data set emerged from semi-structured interviews obtained from a sample of 12 secondary school teachers. The sample size for the study needed to fulfil the methodological criteria for an explanatory mixed methods constructivist model. However, it also needed to be attainable from a pragmatic perspective given that findings formed a key part of the data for a PhD thesis with a specified time-line. Recruiting from 6 to 10 (Morse, 2000) or between 5-25 participants (Mason, 2010) for qualitative interviews is an appropriate amount for a qualitative study using inductive and qualitative methods for interpretation and analysis. The emphasis in such a study is the generation of rich data through in-depth interviewing until the data has reached saturation. Data obtained from such interviews is often extensive, rich and deeply textured.

As noted by Mason (2010) a larger sample size can be regarded favourably by less experienced researchers from the premise that more interviews will yield richer and more reliable data. Sample size has also been explored in a large-scale quantitative study of qualitative interviews and thematic saturation by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006). Their study revealed that 93% of thematic saturation was achieved after six interviews, with 97% achieved after 12. Thus, sample size in qualitative studies may be most effectively determined by the purpose and methodological design underpinning the study. Table 3.3 provides a summary of data gathering instruments and participant samples.

3.8 Instruments

The instruments used within this study were designed to gather data to answer the three primary research questions identified in Chapter 1, section 7.

3.8.1 Stage 1: Questionnaire

The first stage of data collection was gathered from a questionnaire that investigated factors teachers considered significant when identifying and supporting underachieving students in Year 7 and 8. Initially 11 teachers, from a total of 35 teachers employed at Fidelis College completed this questionnaire.

The data from this questionnaire were reviewed post collection and a modified version of the questionnaire was then sent out to the state school teachers. This completed the first stage of data collection (see Appendix A). A total of 23 state school teachers completed the adapted questionnaire, which also included some open-ended questions eliciting some rich qualitative data. The questionnaire was modified by the clarification in the language and expression of some questions to further enhance the data gathering and the inclusion of opportunities to provide a personal response. These modifications were made after collating and reviewing responses from the initial questionnaire provided to the Catholic Colleges. The responses to this questionnaire generated a range of both quantitative and rich qualitative data.

Table 3.3

Summary of Data Instruments and Samples

DATA	DATA SET 1	DATA SET 2	DATA SET 3
Instruments	Questionnaire	Student stimuli cards Teacher Protocol Reflective Survey	Semi-structured interviews Interview Protocol
Data Type	Primary Data QUAN & Qual	Primary Data Quan & Qual	Primary Data QUAL
Participant Sample	Teachers from Fidelis College *n=11* Teachers from Northern State Secondary Schools *n=23*	Year 7 students from Constantius College *n=178*	Teachers from Fidelis, Constantius and Caritas College *n=11* Teacher from Northern State Secondary School *n=1*
Research Question	R1 & R3	R2	R1 & R3

3.8.2 Stage 2: Student reflection instrument

The second stage of data collection was obtained from a short open-ended reflective task given to a cohort Year 7 students attending a Northern Tasmanian Catholic College. This instrument was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from students during a process that included group and individual workshops which occurred annually at the College to assist with student transitions. The design of the process was to allow students to explore key transitional challenges in their first year of secondary school in a supportive context. The reflection sheet was given to students at the final stage

of the process after a teacher-led workshop: it allowed students to provide personal responses to key challenges. (See Appendices I-K).

The instruments used in the study included sets of cards with simple images and reflection sheets with open-ended statements. The images on the cards included photos of a range of common items such as a lock, a basket of balloons, a bunny, a calendar or clock. The cards were used as a stimulus to help generate initial discussion in small groups and to provide a focus for the Year 7 students when they completed the reflection sheet. Images on the cards included between two to three copies of each image. While most images were selected in the hope that they would be somewhat emotionally 'neutral' to the students, some of the images some were more 'positive or upbeat' in tone. Others were selected to represent common 'transitional challenges' for the students, such as managing lockers, homework, assignment deadlines and references to secondary school organisational structures (Evangelou et al., 2008). A part of the exercise was to ensure that students found the activity empowering and engaging. It was important to the researcher to ensure that there were more copies of potential positives or neutrals than challenges. Each class received a set of 60 images. These are listed in Table 3.4. Appendix I provides samples of the images.

Table 3.4

List of Images Used in Student Workshop

POSITIVES/NEUTRALS	CHALLENGES/NEUTRALS
Cute bunny	Desk calendar
Coloured balloons	Clock with 9am on face
Basket of strawberries	Personal organiser
Friends dancing	Lock (for school lockers)
Mobile phone with hello on screen	Post it organisational board
Football players huddled in team	Open laptop
Hands held -dark and light pigment	Post it with urgent written
Picture of earth from space	Fishing hook
Gold credit card	Exit sign
Gold trophy cup	Ivory tablet with Japanese symbols and 'out'
Bar of Gold	written in English on face
Key	Pair of Gold handcuffs
Pair of dice	
Happy chef	

The instrument used to obtain the data for this study was a reflection instrument-a single sheet of coloured paper with 4 open-ended statements:

a. *One thing I worry about at school with my work is….*

b. *A challenge that I have is…*

c. *Two things I could do to help me with these challenges is…*

d. *Something the school could do that would help me is…*

Students were given time to write their responses on the reflection sheets. After the workshop, the completed responses were collected by the teachers, placed in a folder and returned to the researcher. Teachers were provided with an outline or schedule for the process. A copy of this process outline has been included in Appendix I.

3.8.3 Stage 3: Teacher interviews

The final stage of data collection was obtained from semi-structured interviews obtained from 12 teacher participants, 11 of whom were employed within the Catholic Education sector and who had taught at a Northern Catholic College. Examples of questions included were:

1. *Can you tell me a little bit about yourself as a teacher- including what subjects you teach, and what groups of students you are currently teaching?*
2. *How would you describe your approach to teaching and learning?*
3. *What are your understandings and beliefs around middle schooling?*
4. *Have you worked (or are currently working with) any students in Year 7 and 8 that you (or someone else) have identified as an underachiever?*

(See Appendix B for the Interview Schedule). Interviews were conducted both on and off campus, depending on the preference of each teacher and the availability of private offices for the purpose. Table 3.5 provides a summary of ethical permissions, procedures and analytical techniques used in the study.

3.9 Data Processes and Analysis

After gathering the data for each set as outlined earlier, data were processed and analysed using a combination of descriptive statistical methodologies (Creswell, 2005) and inductive thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell, 2013, Thomas, 2006). Section 3.9 outlines techniques and procedures for processing, analysing and interpreting data for each data set.

3.9.1 Data set 1: Questionnaires

Data from questionnaires was collected over two separate six-week periods and an initial analysis was undertaken. Quantitative data were collected, sorted and organised into table form. Qualitative responses were processed by being typed up separately and then coded and placed into thematic categories that corresponded with major themes emerging from the literature (Creswell, 2005; Thomas, 2006). General statistical methods (Creswell, 2005) were used for presenting and analysing quantitative data within the questionnaire.

Data that emerged from open-ended questions were organised into broad categories and themes, using inductive thematic analysis techniques, including categorising and aggregating phrases into codes and categories, which were compared with themes and concepts arising from the literature and collapsed or reduced to major emerging themes (Braun & Clark, 2006, Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell, 2013). Data from each question was interpreted and reported on individually, then summarised.

Table 3.5

Summary of Data Procedures and Analysis Techniques

DATA SET	D1	D2	D3
Ethical Permissions and Consents	Ethical permissions HREC, TCEO Tas Department of Education Principals of Schools and Colleges Informed Consent Forms distributed and returned	Ethical permissions HREC, TCEO Principal of Constantius College	Ethical permissions HREC, TCEO, Tasmanian Department of Education Principals of Schools and Colleges Informed Consent Forms distributed
Processes	Surveys distributed over 2 separate 6 week periods Quantitative data sorted and tabled Qualitative data tabled separately Qualitative data de-identified and coded Inductive thematic analysis techniques Codes compared to the literature	Students engage in workshop activities led by class teachers Survey instrument distributed to students after workshop-survey completed anonymously Surveys collected, tabled and analysed Qualitative data tabled and coded using inductive analysis techniques	Teachers complete interviews. Additional observation notes taken by researcher Interviews recorded, transcribed Transcriptions coded for emerging themes-compared to observations Tables created of themes, codes, signature statements and statement summaries Summary tables sent to participants for member checking Qualitative data themes compared to findings in the literature
Data Analysis Techniques	Descriptive statistic techniques used for quantitative data (Creswell, 2005) Inductive thematic analysis techniques used for qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006)	Qualitative data coded Codes reduced by grouping into categories using key words, phrases and themes Process repeated until final themes elicited Themes, codes and categories presented in frequency tables to ascertain how frequently key themes appeared in the data	Data coded and sorted into key categories and phrases Categories and phrases clustered into major themes using inductive thematic analysis techniques as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), Hood (2007) and Creswell (2013) et al. Tables, codes, findings compared to interview transcripts and summaries Reduction of codes into categories Followed by aggregation of codes, categories into themes based on common patterns Process repeated several times until themes reduced into the three major themes aligning with the three research questions

3.9.2 Data set 2: Student data processes

The second data set, including both quantitative and qualitative data, were collected as the end part of a reflective activity conducted at Constantius College described earlier in section 3.7.2. Examples of the activity and survey can be found in Appendices I, J and K.

The data collection process for student reflective surveys began with students being divided into gender groups where they participated in an active workshop run by either male or female teachers depending on the gender of the group. The active workshop began with warm up games and then quickly moved to small group activities based on exploring key themes for Year 7 students, such as engagement, resilience and connections to secondary school.

These themes were explored through small group activities that included games, drawing, discussions, presentations and feedback to the whole group. Students concluded this activity by completing a small card that focused on identifying a positive affirmation or statement that they wished to make. The next part of the day was spent back with a key core teacher in their usual room. This activity was designed to be a reflective process that would enable students to identify any personal concerns with either academic or pastoral transition, and to allow the students and teacher time to brainstorm or reflect on strategies that could be used to address these. The inclusion of the reflection task and sheet was a key part of the process, which aimed at assisting students to identify any concerns. The completion of the reflection sheet was conducted in class groups with a teacher so that students could do this within a smaller group and

supportive environment. Thus, the second data set was formed from the findings from the 178 completed survey instruments.

3.9.3 Student data procedures

To commence this activity, students were independently invited to a table set up at the front of the class, where they could select two images that appealed to them from a series of 24 different pictures and symbols. Students completed activities including a think-pair-share in small groups where they brainstormed positives and challenges about secondary school and then collectively identified the main challenges and positives. The students were then given the reflection sheet and completed this independently. The culmination of the activity was a whole class discussion led by the supervising teacher which explored strategies identified by students and reinforced and summarised these for the whole group.

The data were retained and stored at the school until the end of the day. Teachers were invited to look at and review the responses for their own classes before returning the surveys. All data from student reflection sheets was typed up into tables and any identifying personal data included from individual sheets was removed as had been outlined in the ethics application. The data set included responses from 178 students in total.

3.9.4 Data analysis from data set 2

As combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to analyse and interpret the number of responses and themes. Quantitative data were presented in tables, using formulas taken from

descriptive statistics to ascertain the frequency, mean and mode as outlined earlier (Creswell, 2005; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; McCormick, Salcedo, & Poh, 2015). Qualitative inductive research methods were used to process data with a specific focus on thematic analysis as outlined by Creswell (2005, 2013) and Braun and Clarke (2006). To assist with managing the data, a table was created for each open-ended statement. After the data were typed into tables and de-identified, each comment was read, divided into text segments and given a code. Prominent codes fitted into general or open categories of meaning for each core question, and these were then read again analysed, and reduced or collapsed into broader categories.

For example, the original open categories for Question 1 numbered around 44 different types of responses. These were reduced to 13 categories by grouping categories under common themes using key words and text segments to identify themes. Final categories for all codes for each question numbered from 13, 14, 11 and 16 for the four questions respectively.

The overall number of students represented was 178. However, the number of different responses was often significantly larger than this because many students included two to three different themes, phrases and text segments within one response. Most of the responses from the first three prompt statements consisted of phrases, segments or sentences. If students were unsure they responded with a question mark, or a comment such as 'I don't know', or similar. After reducing the responses, the categories were grouped and reduced again into six major themes. These themes were compared to the preliminary themes obtained from data collected from teacher

participants from the main study to see whether there was any correlation between emerging themes between the data sets. The resulting data and discussion regarding the themes has been reported in detail in Chapter 5.

3.9.5 Data set 3: Teacher interviews

The third and final gathering of data for the study stemmed from semi-structured interviews obtained from a purposeful sample of participants, which included teachers who were currently employed within, or who had been employed by Catholic Colleges and one state school within the region.

3.9.6 Teacher interview procedures

The teacher participants for the third data set were invited to complete a semi-structured interview of 40 to 50 minutes with the researcher (see Appendix B for interview schedules). Interviews were recorded using an Olympus mini audio recorder. Observation notes were made during the interview and afterwards. Two interviews occurred at a distance, through email and social media follow-up. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed after each interview. Data from all transcripts were de-identified and was processed using thematic analysis techniques in the manner outlined by Braun and Clark (2006) and case study methodologies used by Creswell (2013) and Yin (2006). After this process, summary tables of each teacher's transcript, including codes emerging from each interview transcript, signature statements and specific reference quotes were created. A short interview or meeting was scheduled for the purposes of member checking to clarify understanding and to

follow up on new perspectives raised within the initial interview. Each participant was sent a copy of the data obtained from the interview/s including emerging categories and themes, samples of signature quotes, and an interview summary. Participants were given the opportunity to respond to the data and summaries and confirm, clarify or withdraw data before it was processed and included within the case studies (Carlson, 2010). Eleven out of the 12 participants responded to the member checking process in person or via email, phone or written confirmation. Samples of teacher summary tables can be found in Appendix K.

3.9.7 Data analysis from data set 3

Data were transcribed after each interview as it was completed, so that a spiral of data collection and analysis occurred during the collection of the primary data through the interview schedules. All interviews were fully transcribed and annotated with a preliminary analysis, which was then followed by open coding of all interview transcripts. This included re-reading and annotating interview transcripts, after making the transcriptions, before coding all transcripts. From transcript data and summaries, the processes used in the study followed a spiral reiterative cycle, whereby data were analysed and coded based on key categories. Categories and phrases were clustered and collapsed into major themes, using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Thus, data were interpreted using a general inductive approach (Hood, 2007). While attention was given to emerging themes, a focus of the study examined teacher perspectives and practices on the identification

and addressing of concerns on student underachievement in early secondary years. An important focus of data collection and analysis was to gain an understanding of what teacher perceptions and perspectives were when identifying young adolescent academic underachievers and the practices they used to address this. Given the interpretive social constructionist epistemology underpinning the mixed methods design (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998) using flexible and pragmatic qualitative research techniques were instrumental throughout the study.

The use of inductive thematic analysis for interpreting qualitative data provided a sensitive methodology that allowed authentic interpretations to develop and emerge from questionnaire, interview and student survey data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was an appropriate fit within the interpretive constructivist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2005). The interpretive approach is noted for being a method of analysis and interpretation effective for research problems where "it is important to understand several individuals common or shared experiences about a phenomenon…in order to develop practices…or to develop a deeper understanding" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81).

Categories and themes were then elicited from interview data, which assisted in the interpretation of rich and dense textual data, where findings were clustered into categories and reduced into themes, which clarified and illuminated teacher perceptions, perspectives and practice. Separate tables of all codes that were included in the individual interview summaries were created, and these were compared to interview transcripts again and summaries. From

these results, a table of more than 40 different codes was created, which were then reduced into 16 categories. The list of 16 categories was then reduced again by aggregating the categories into common patterns. This process of aggregation occurred repeatedly, to allow all categories and codes to be compared, contrasted and reviewed, against both raw and processed data. Eventually several themes emerged and were reviewed and contrasted again to the patterns emerging from aggregated and processed data. Transformed data were re-read and categories and themes emerging from different data sets were combined to form a focused study of the topic using an explanatory mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

This approach was taken for a variety of reasons. Inductive thematic analysis methods, used in many qualitative studies, are a practical and effective tool to assist with both interpreting data and generating theory from rich and dense case study data (Hood, 2007). However, while attention was given to emerging themes, meaning clusters and to clarifying and identifying the textual and structural experiences of participants, the major focus of the study was to uncover and explore teacher perspectives and the practices they used to identify and support young adolescent academic underachievers.

Three tables have been created to present the themes and their related categories and codes visually. Table 3.6, 3.7 and 3.8 present a detailed schema, displaying the three themes, supporting categories and reduced primary codes that inform and organise the presentation and discussion of findings in Chapter 6 and 7. Samples of evidence from the data have been provided as an example

to support codes and categories. All comments cited from participants in the study have been presented throughout this study in italics.

3.10 Limitations and Reflexive Nature of the Study

The data gathered for the study includes both qualitative and quantitative data, with an emphasis on qualitative overall. Several attempts were made over an 18-month period to gather data from a selection of research sites and participants using a range of methods and recruitment processes as described earlier in the chapter. Numbers for participants who completed questionnaires in the first data set (34 in total) were lower than initially anticipated. Limited personal data was collected on teachers who completed questionnaires and this did not include gender identification, although teachers were asked to indicate the subjects taught and duration of teaching experience. Recruitment processes for Data Set 3 began initially through an advertisement and circulation of written and online recruitment material, and ultimately relied on snowball and selective sampling processes. While these processes ensured that 12 participants were identified for the interviews; a number that was deemed adequate for the nature of the data and qualitative methods used (Morse, 2000), the participants in the third data set were predominantly female. These limitations in the methodologies have been addressed earlier throughout the chapter in relevant sections.

Table 3.6

RQ1 Perceptions: Themes, Categories, Codes and Samples

	TEACHER PERCEPTION THEMES	CATEGORIES/CODES	SAMPLES
RQ1 What <u>characteristics</u> and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?	IDENTIFYING *I think it is hard to define a student as an underachiever.*	Limited participation and low work output	*This student doesn't ask questions, doesn't try to clarify instructions, doesn't come to seek help when it is time to work and doesn't have any (to hand in).*
		Challenging and/or avoidant classroom behaviours	*For some students, there are going to be general avoidance tactics. You know, there is going to be getting out of the seat, going to talk to other people…*
		Literacy and numeracy gaps and barriers	*In many cases, there are literacy and numeracy issues but not to the extreme…*
		Irregular attendance	*It can be one of the signs, the student who doesn't come in…they know there is going to be an assessment and that is the day they don't come.*

Table 3.7

RQ1 Perspectives: Themes, Categories, Codes and Samples

	TEACHER PERSPECTIVE THEMES	CATEGORIES/CODES	SAMPLES
RQ1 What characteristics and <u>factors</u> do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?	FACTORS IMPACTING ON IDENTIFICATION *And it moves, yes, I guess the bar moves and they go under or over it.*	Background factors	*I have no information on them but that they are behind.*
		Differences between Year 7 & 8	*Year 7 & 8 I find quite different. There is a lot more acceptance in Year 8.* *Year 7 there can be all that extra conflict, not knowing how high school works*
		Transitions	*It is such a challenging time of transition, socially, emotionally, physically and academically*
		Meeting the standard	*He can fall through the cracks not being someone who comes and asks.*
		Barriers and challenges	*Time. There is never enough!*
		Formal identification procedures Learner Confidence	*You are just doing whatever you can to build their confidence*

Table 3.8

RQ3 Practice: themes, categories, codes and samples

	TEACHER PRACTICE THEMES	CATEGORIES/CODES	SAMPLES
RQ3 What <u>practices</u> do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?	SUPPORTING *I thought everybody had that feeling, that love of learning…*		*You have got to know your students because if you don't know your students and where they are and where they can go and what is going on with their lives, then you don't understand them and that has an impact on their learning.*
		Collaborating	*Building those relationships with teacher who teach the same subject, I think is probably key.* *Communication is vital with the family, with the carers, to touch base with them*
		Connecting to Learning: curriculum	*If we did that differently and if it was integrated with a broader focus, when the kids come back would they connect in much quicker or more easily.*
		Connecting to Learning: pedagogy	*I concentrated on negotiating baby steps with him by breaking tasks down…*
		Barriers and challenges	*It is so hard to do justice to meeting all of our students' needs.*

As discussed in section 3.4 and 3.5, the interpretive constructionist framework used to underpin the study was reflexive in its design (Gadamer, 1985; Holroyd, 2007). Processes for analysing and interpreting data followed thematic analysis techniques outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Creswell (2013) amongst a range of others cited previously. These processes introduce natural checks and balances for the qualitative researcher through the complex and extended processes of transcription, coding and reorganisation of data from coded transcripts, to lists, then tables and text, reorganisation into categories and repeating this cycle several times. During these times, notes were made and observations collected in journals, with these being compared back to findings and themes emerging from the data. This study makes no apology for its reflexive nature and use of the researcher as an instrument within the study (Creswell, 2013). However, it would be remiss not to acknowledge this aspect of the overall study and thesis within this chapter.

3.11 Researcher's Personal Statement

I became aware of my personal and professional interests in this topic as a beginning teacher in the period 1999-2002. I became a teacher in my mid-thirties, after having studied English, History and then Education at a regional university as a mature aged student. I was the sole parent of three children all of whom attended primary school during my studies. In my first few years as a teacher, my children were predominantly in the middle years of schooling, from pre-adolescence to early adolescence in age and stage. As a mature aged student, I re-discovered a love of learning, which had always characterised me, as I later realised during my experiences at university. This was something that I understood in hindsight, as

throughout much of my secondary schooling, I was what would have been regarded as a 'selective achiever' (OECD, 1998) and at times, an 'underachiever' as defined by Peterson and Colangelo (1996). I was a committed and passionate mature age student and, at the time, would have liked to undertake an honours year and possibly pursue an academic career. However, financial and practical considerations, including the educational needs of my children, helped me to decide to use my final year of tertiary study to gain a practical qualification in Education. This, I hoped, would enable me to provide my family with more opportunities and overall life choices. Hence I completed a graduate diploma in Education and became a secondary school teacher.

I initially thought that my pathway would lie in senior academic teaching. However, as with many teachers new to the profession, once employed I found myself teaching predominantly students from Year 7 to 9, with the occasional class of Year 10 to 12 students; these being mainly in more functional areas of 'foundation level' level English, literacy or religious education. While teaching many disengaged, challenging or struggling students from Year 7 to 12, I found myself wondering why these students remained disengaged, often displaying poor literacy skills and/or exhibiting low academic confidence coupled with challenging behaviours so consistently over the course of their education.

At the time, I did not make any connections with my own secondary school experiences, believing that my own uneven levels of achievement in high school were a matter of choice based on personal and family circumstances and were not in any way relevant to my present context or that of my students. Wondering in this way about some of the students I now taught, I found that I possessed a firm belief

that schools and systems needed to focus their resources on assisting disengaged and or underachieving students or students who struggled with literacy as they entered secondary school, rather than as they exited it. I also believed that the curriculum and learning and teaching structures offered in Year 7 and 8 were not always appropriately targeted at the students I was teaching and did not help to engage many of the students in my classes. These experiences led me to become interested in the areas of middle schooling, curriculum, pedagogy, literacy and learning difficulties-areas that have continue to define my professional interests and areas of expertise throughout my 20 years of teaching experience.

My intuitive theories were that while teachers, schools and systems may be presented with a range of models and paradigms with which to view the young adolescent learner, their beliefs are likely to be determined by their own experiences and shaped by personal and professional influences from their own educational background. My own experiences as a teacher and as a Middle Years Coordinator and Head of School working in the Catholic secondary system led me to believe that teachers are influenced by current research to some extent.

Teachers are generally excited by the prospect of a new model or theory that may offer them a new and helpful tool to use in their primary purpose (that of educating students) but their practices are determined ultimately by what they appear to find useful (what works) combined with personal and professional beliefs about students, schools and education in general. I believed that teachers approach theories on education from the perspective of sceptical yet hopeful consumers. The approach or knowledge needs to be useful, timely, readily available and sustainable. Middle years' education and the learning needs of the young

adolescent are supported and valued in so far as they are helpful for the teacher, the school, educational goals and appear to address issues and concerns that are impacting on the student, the teacher and classroom learning. Thus, my personal experiences have informed my professional interests. While positioning myself as both a reflexive researcher and experienced professional practitioner within this study, it would be dishonest and inaccurate not to acknowledge how my own beliefs and assumptions have most certainly have helped to shape my own perspectives when exploring this topic.

3.12 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has explored the methodologies used within the study, outlining the structural and conceptual framework and epistemological paradigm, including the setting, research sites, participants and three primary sets of data collected. The chapter has also expanded on the types of qualitative and quantitative data collected for the study, survey and data instruments, detailing methods used for processing and analysing data findings. Ethical considerations and permissions have also been outlined. The next three chapters explore findings from the three main data sets, exploring the primary themes of perspectives, perceptions and practice, beginning with Chapter 4 which presents the findings from the first data set as a case overview.

Chapter 4: Data Set 1-Teacher Questionnaire

"How would you define the term 'underachievement'?"

Not achieving a standard as defined by Australian Curriculum Standards; not advancing as they progress (in high school); not learning, making connections, questioning and choosing to search for more knowledge (Teacher A).[3]

4.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter presents the data gathered from a questionnaire circulated to Catholic school teachers and state-school teachers within the research setting. Data are presented and organised into sections based on the organisation of the questionnaire consisting of four main categories. The initial section immediately following the introduction includes demographic information and data on respondents and their contexts and backgrounds, thus providing an overall perspective on respondents and their background contexts. Quantitative data from the questionnaire are presented using basic descriptive statistic techniques, while the qualitative data is presented using themes that emerged from open-ended questions on the questionnaire. These themes emerged through the processing of data using thematic analysis techniques. Methods for processing data have been described in Chapter 3: Methodology. All quoted comments from teacher qualitative data have been reported using italics throughout the chapter. The chapter concludes with a preliminary discussion

[3] In the interests of maintaining consistency when presenting qualitative evidence, throughout the study all samples of teacher and student statements cited have been presented using italics.

which summarises the key findings from the first data set which relate to the major themes of the study. This approach is taken to help organise the broad array of data and to assist with establishing the major premises that emerge and are discussed in more detail within meeting the standard based in Chapter 7. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings from the completed questionnaire.

4.2 Organisation and Presentation of Questionnaire Data

As outlined in Chapter 3 Methodology, after ethical permissions were received from ethics boards, educational organisations and school principals, an invitation letter, consent forms and copy of the questionnaire were circulated to teachers from Catholic and state secondary schools in the region. This formed the first stage of data collection for the first data set. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The questionnaire data for the first data set formed four broad categories:

1. Teaching context and background
2. Experiences and beliefs
3. Identifying academic underachievers
4. Practice

The results presented in this chapter have been organised using the four categories outlined above. Listed in each section are the specific questions asked in each of the four categories. Some questions include forced choice or requested participants to outline specific items from a list while others encouraged open-ended responses. The type of question and nature of response has been indicated

in the summary of results for each question. Data from the questionnaires were collated and presented using basic quantitative methodologies from descriptive statistics. Qualitative data have been presented using thematic analysis methods as outlined in Chapter 3, section 9.1.

The demographic data are presented in Tables 4.1 to 4.6. Supporting discussion includes the findings from Fidelis College and the regional city state schoolteachers. These findings are presented individually, and as an aggregate. Where relevant, data from Fidelis College is denoted as CS (Catholic school) on the tables. Data obtained from the state school teachers surveyed has been denoted as SS (state schools). Data that has been presented as an aggregate of both Fidelis College and state secondary schools is denoted on tables as 'AS' or All Schools.

4.3 Questionnaire Section 1: Teaching Context and Background

In Section 1 quantitative data were gathered and presented in frequency tables using descriptive statistical methods as described in Chapter 3, section 9.4 (Creswell, 2005; McCormick et al., 2015). Table 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 display the years of experience for teachers participating in the study. Overall, the distribution showed that most teachers participating in the questionnaire ranged from being relatively experienced professionals to highly experienced professionals. Just under a third of the group of respondents (32.35%) claimed more than 20 years of teaching experience.

Table 4.1

Aggregated Survey Results for All schools: Teacher Experience

TEACHING EXPERIENCE (yrs.)	FREQUENCY
20 years and beyond	11
5-9	7
10-14	7
15-19	4
0-4	3
No response indicated	2

Note. Base number of teachers: *n=34.*

Table 4.2

Teacher Experience: Catholic School (CS) and State School (SS) Differences

NUMBER OF YEARS	CS	SS	AS TOTAL
More than 20 years	2	9	11
10-14 years	4	3	7
5-9 years	2	5	7
15-19 years	2	2	4
0-4 years	1	2	3
No response indicated	0	2	2

Note. Base number of teachers: *n=34.*CS =Catholic School. SS= State Schools. AS=All Schools.

Table 4.3

Distribution and Range of Teacher Experience for State-School Teachers

0 -9 YEARS	10-19 YEARS	20-29 YEARS	30 to 40 YEARS
1, 2, 6, 7, 8	10, 12,	20, 25, 25	30, 30, 31, 35, 40

Note. Base number of state school respondents: *n=17*.

In the questionnaire distributed to state-school teachers, the question allowed teachers to record their individual number of teaching years. The

amount of teaching experience from this group of state-school teachers ranged from 1 year to over 40 years of teaching experience. Two state-school teachers did not include their years of experience. Three teachers who completed this question, indicated that they had less than five years teaching experience. However, most teachers who responded to the questionnaire from both Catholic and state schools were highly experienced teachers. As discussed in Chapter 3.10.1, the sample size of teachers completing the questionnaire was low with *n*=34. However, the level of experience recorded for teachers was high. The mean or average number of years of experience for respondents was 18.8 years, the median amount of experience was 20 years and the range of teaching experience being 39 years between the least experienced and most experienced teacher.

4.3.1 Questionnaire section 1: Q2- Teaching Year 7 and 8

Of the 34 respondents from all schools, 25 of the teachers (73.5%) noted that they taught Year 7 and 8 students regularly, four teachers (12.12%) taught students in these year levels occasionally, and three teachers (9.09%) indicated that their teaching experience with Year 7 and 8 students was not current but had occurred in the past. One respondent (3.03%) indicated that they did not teach this age group and one respondent did not answer this item. Nevertheless, within this group, all 34 respondents indicated that they had some interactions or experiences with students in these year levels, through roles other than direct teaching, including curriculum, pastoral, learning support, extracurricular or leadership roles. This data is presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Teachers Currently Working with Year 7 and 8 Students

TEACHER EXPERIENCE	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Regularly teach yr. 7 & 8	25	0.735	73.52%
Occasionally teach yr. 7 & 8	4	0.117	11.76%
Have taught in the past	3	0.088	8.82%
Do not teach Yr. 7 & 8	1	0.029	2.94%
No response indicated	1	0.029	2.94%
TOTAL	34		99.98%

Note. Base teacher sample *n=34*. Percentage calculated to the second decimal place.

4.3.2 Questionnaire section 1: Q3- Teacher subject expertise

Table 4.5 displays the spread of teacher experience across different teaching areas. The table includes 47 responses from the sample of 34 teachers who completed the questionnaire. Responses indicated that a significant number of teachers had experience in more than one discipline area. From the total number of responses, it was evident that 34% of the teachers had experience teaching Languages and Humanities. Over 19% of the teachers taught Maths and Science. Approximately 14% of the teachers taught Design and Technologies and over 12% taught within Creative Arts departments. A smaller number had also worked as Learning Support staff or in Health and Physical Education.

Table 4.5

Teacher Subject Area

SUBJECT AREA	CS FREQUENCY	SS FREQUENCY	AS FREQUENCY	AS PERCENTAGE
Language & Humanities	6	10	16	34.04%
Maths and Sciences	5	4	9	19.14%
Design & Technologies	2	5	7	14.89%
The Arts	2	4	6	12.76%
Learning Support	1	2	3	6.38%
Digital Technologies	0	2	2	4.25%
Health & Physical Education	1	1	2	4.25%
Other	2	0	2	4.25%
TOTAL	17	28	47	99.96%

Note. Base number of responses: *n= 47.* Number of teachers completing the question *n=34.* Percentage calculated to the second decimal place.

4.3.3 Questionnaire section 1: Q 4- Working with Year 7/8 students in other ways

While 32 teachers from both Catholic and state schools taught Year 7 and 8 students in some capacity, two teachers indicated 'other' on their responses. These teachers did not directly teach Year 7 and 8 students but held roles that led them to support and work with teachers who were directly involved, and who potentially sought support from the leaders, regarding Year 7 and 8 students.

4.3.4 Demographic summary of teaching context and background

The sample of teachers numbered 34 teachers with years of experience ranging from experienced to highly experienced teachers. The total range of teaching years was 39, ranging from one year of experience compared to a teacher with 40+ years. The median figure for all teachers supported a figure of 10 to 15 years. Many respondents in the sample would be considered highly experienced teachers who worked with students from a range of backgrounds and abilities. Additionally, 25 of the 34 teachers (73.5%) indicated that they regularly taught Year 7 and 8 students, with only two teachers (6.06%) from Fidelis College noting that their recent experiences with students in this age group came from other areas (leadership and pastoral roles).

The respondents were also representative of a range of subject areas and curricula. Around one third reported their teaching area included Languages and Humanities, with 20% of the teachers in the sample having a mathematics and/or science teaching experience and knowledge. The Arts and Design Technologies were also well represented, with a fewer number of teachers reporting that their learning areas encompassed learning support or digital technology.

4.4 Questionnaire Section 2: Teacher Experiences and Beliefs.

Teacher responses to questions from Section 2 include both qualitative and quantitative data. Questions 5, 6, 7 and 9 elicited quantitative data, which was presented in Tables 4.6, 4.7 and 4.8. The qualitative data gathered from Q9 was processed and summarised as outlined in Chapter 3, section 3.9.

4.4.1 Questionnaire section 2: Q 5- Teacher perceptions of young adolescents

Question 5 focused on teacher perceptions regarding teaching students in Year 7 and 8. This question asked teachers to indicate whether they enjoyed teaching students in this age group or whether they found this age group to be challenging. The options and results are presented in Table 4.6. The abbreviation AS stands for All schools and includes combined results.

Results showed that just over half of the teacher respondents indicated that they found teaching students in this age group to be largely rewarding, while around 38% indicated that they found the group to be both challenging and rewarding. Two teachers indicated that teaching students in these year levels was predominantly challenging.

Table 4.6

Teacher Perceptions when Teaching Year 7 and 8 students

DESCRIPTOR	CS TEACHER FREQUENCY	SS TEACHER FREQUENCY	AS TEACHER FREQUENCY	AS PERCENTAGE
Challenging	2	0	2	5.88%
Challenging and rewarding	4	9	13	38.23%
Largely rewarding	6	12	18	52.94%
Neither challenging nor rewarding	0	0	0	0
Missing Data		1		
TOTAL	12	22	34	97.05%

Note. Base number of teachers: N =*34.* CS = Catholic Schools. SS = State Schools. AS = All Schools. Percentage calculated to the second decimal place

4.4.2 Questionnaire section 2: Q 6- State schoolteacher beliefs

Included in the revised questionnaire distributed to state school teachers was a question that elicited information regarding teacher educational perspectives and practice. The question was not presented as a Likert Scale, but instead requested teachers identify one of the categories below that most described their beliefs regarding teaching students in Year 7 and 8. This item was included to help establish whether teachers overtly subscribed to specific beliefs and how this might impact on their practice when working with student underachievers. Table 4.7 includes the results from the 23 respondents from state schools who responded to this question.

Table 4.7

State School Teacher Philosophies and Beliefs

DESCRIPTOR	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
My teaching is based around subject-based knowledge and pedagogies and the Australian Curriculum Guidelines	10	0.434	43.47%
I follow a 'student-centred' approach in my teaching. I adapt my curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of the students	9	0.391	39.13%
I believe the principles of effective teaching are similar for all my students. I use these approaches as my guiding philosophy	3	0.130	13.04%
I believe in and usually follow Middle Years philosophies and practices for the education of young adolescents	1	0.043	4.34%
TOTAL	23		99.98%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n=23.*

State school-teachers followed an approach or philosophy that was discipline-based and grounded in working from Australian or Tasmanian Curriculum or one that indicated that they would adapt their curriculum and pedagogy to meet the needs of their students. Only 1 of the 23 state school teachers surveyed claimed that their focus for students in these year levels utilised middle years' philosophies or practices. Three teachers noted that they believed effective teaching and learning practices were similar for students of all ages.

4.4.3 Questionnaire section 2: Q 7- Teacher educational approach

The questionnaire given to state school teachers included an open-ended response question that followed Q6, requesting respondents to elaborate on their educational philosophies by including examples of approaches they might use which would support these beliefs. Using thematic analysis methods as described in Chapter 3 Methodology, section 3.7, responses to Q7 were transcribed, coded into categories, tabled and sorted into five broad themes which were expectations and guidelines, flexible approaches and negotiated learning tasks, curriculum specific teaching adjustments, pedagogical methods, and relationships.

Many comments highlighted clarity and consistency around expectations and explicit guidelines. The themes of flexibility and negotiation, curriculum and pedagogical adjustments comprised the largest number of responses. Teachers noted the need for a range of student-centred, negotiated or flexible tasks such as adapting curriculum choices for mainstream students (in addition to students

with learning barriers and special needs) and provision of individual learning opportunities. A teacher commented:

> *I try to give students choices and options on some aspects of their work, within the guidelines of assignments* (Teacher B).

Another teacher wrote:

> *As support teacher for SDR (Students on a Disability Register) it is crucially important that it is done this way. However, adapting curriculum choices for mainstream students is also necessary when learning abilities vary so much* (Teacher C).

Teachers also described use of curriculum adjustments such as scaffolds, differentiated tasks, teaching activities that were geared to the interests of young adolescents, modelling, specifically with mathematics, using open ended questions to spark curiosity and the use of technology and media resources. As one teacher described:

> *Differentiation-following the curriculum where necessary. This age comes with such a wide-range of abilities-need to be very flexible and adaptable* (Teacher D).

Pedagogical strategies included group activities, hands on learning, using a range of learning styles and approaches when presenting content, peer group activities and collaborative learning tasks and opportunities. A teacher commented on the importance of holding high expectations:

> *Learn to have fun with them, set high standards and believe in their capacity to excel* (Teacher E).

When discussing relationships, teachers emphasised creating positive environments and relationship between teacher and student, understanding the adolescent mindset, and learning to have fun with the students. One teacher commented on the need to:

> *Develop a relationship first and foremost…and a warm caring learning environment* (Teacher F).

Responses to Q7 could be classified into two further categories, which loosely correlated with the predominant teaching philosophies selected by teachers. Factors and practices listed could be characterised by a focus that enhanced either student-centred or task centred approaches. The development and encouragement of a student-centred approach which encouraged active student participation, growth of self-belief and the development of learner confidence through positive relationships, would allow underachieving students to connect to classroom learning activities. Approaches that could be said to encourage and further the development of a task centred focus for learning, included providing guidelines, expectations and benchmarks:

> *Setting high but achievable standards…(and) consistent expectations* (Teacher G).

Teachers also valued the provision of explicit teaching for skills and adjustments through supportive pedagogies and the provision of timely and thoughtful feedback as illustrated by the comment below:

> *The explicit teaching of skills and information and adaptation of materials wherever possible to suit students who are high achievers or having difficulty -usually with literacy* (Teacher H).

Other examples included modifying standard curriculum materials to enable students to achieve positive learning outcomes from a standard curriculum and the use of open ended questions or inquiry-based learning.

4.4.4 Questionnaire section 2: Q8 – Use of specific teaching models

This question was not included in the original questionnaire given to teachers at Fidelis College but was included in the amended state school teacher questionnaire mailed out to the state schools in the region. There were 15 responses to this question. Ten teachers, approximately 67% of the sample indicated that they did not use specific teaching models or learning approaches. Two teachers (approximately 13%) indicated that they did and three teachers or 20% believed that all approaches discussed in Question 7 were applicable to students in Year 7 and 8. This indicates that respondents answering this question believed that teaching practices used by the teachers were considered effective practice for all secondary students and were not teaching practices specifically used when teaching young adolescents. Table 4.8 shows a summary of this information.

Table 4.8

Use of Specific Teaching Models for Year 7 & 8 Students

RESPONSE	SS FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
No	10	0.6666	66.66%
Yes	2	0.1333	13.33%
Applies to all	3	0.2000	20.00%
TOTAL	15		99.99%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n=15.* SS=State Schools

4.4.5 Questionnaire section 2: Q 9-Perspectives on underachieving students

Table 4.9 shows state school teachers' responses regarding students not meeting expected learning outcomes for their year level. Question 9 was not part of the initial questionnaire circulated to Catholic school teachers but was included on the amended questionnaire given to state school teachers in the region. State school teachers were invited to mark all responses that they felt applicable to their experience. The question asked teachers to indicate their preferences but did not require them to rank them on a Likert Scale. The 23 teachers accumulated 63 responses in total. Around 25% of the responses listed learning barriers as a reason for underachievement. This figure was followed by literacy and numeracy barriers and behavioural reasons, which accounted for around 22% for each of the responses. Not meeting expected outcomes due to engagement or reasons such as health or wellbeing factors accounted for around 16% and 14% respectively.

Table 4.9

State School Teacher Experiences with Academic Underachievers

DESCRIPTOR: *I believe that students did not meet expected learning outcomes because...*	SS FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Students found it hard to engage with the activities and curriculum due to an identified barrier or learning difficulty or disability.	16	0.2539	25.39%
Students had difficulty understanding the learning activities or curriculum due to literacy and numeracy barriers.	14	0.2222	22.22%
Students did not engage with learning activities or curriculum for behavioural reasons.	14	0.2222	22.22%
Students did not attempt to participate or engage with the curriculum for other reasons (Egg: wellbeing issues or health reasons).	10	0.1587	15.87%
Students did not attempt to engage with the learning activities or curriculum.	9	0.1428	14.28%
TOTAL	63		99.98%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n =23.*

4.5 Questionnaire section 3: Identifying Academic Underachievers

Questions 10-13 included in section 3 of the questionnaire required teachers to define underachievement and identify factors and characteristics of academic underachievers in the classroom. This section included three questions that invited a qualitative response and one question that elicited quantitative data by requiring teachers to choose factors they considered significant from a list of options. As described in Chapter 3, sections 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9., quantitative data were analysed and processed using descriptive statistics and qualitative data processed using thematic analysis techniques.

4.5.1 Questionnaire section 3: Q 10- Defining and identifying underachievement

Question 10 asked teachers to provide a personal definition of an academic underachiever. Seventeen state schoolteachers responded to this question. Findings were categorised into four primary themes. Respondents commonly commented that underachieving students demonstrated literacy and numeracy barriers, were not meeting standard benchmarks based on age or Australian Curriculum guidelines, showed a lack of effort and engagement, and did not achieve their potential. The themes invoked intrinsic factors, student-centred definitions outlined by Krause and Krause (1981) such as literacy and numeracy barriers, or a lack of effort, such as the one as noted by teacher I:

> *Not achieving a standard as defined by Australian Curriculum standard; not advancing as they progress, learning, making connections, questioning and choosing to search for more knowledge* (Teacher I).

Themes also referenced extrinsic factors including those which featured in the definition of McCall's definition (1994), such as widespread disengagement from learning resulting in student failure. From the classroom teacher's perspective, this was illustrated by:

> *Students not achieving their potential, students not achieving successful learning outcomes resulting from their lack of effort and lack of potential* (Teacher F).

Three respondents gave definitions that acknowledged the impact of barriers, external factors, or literacy and numeracy deficits on underachieving students, for example:

> *Failure to achieve at even a basic skill level due to a range of factors, all I believe relating to poor literacy skills and missed 'steps' in education generally…chronic absenteeism, poor family perceptions or value of education, socio-economic circumstances* (Teacher J).

The operational definitions provided by state schoolteachers lacked an acknowledgement of a relationship or connection between student underachievement and educational failure, as outlined in definitions by Kovacs and Hanson (OECD, 1998) or Gonski (2011) in Chapter 2. Kovacs and Hanson's report for the OECD outlined three aspects to student failure to achieve; psychological, social and institutional. State schoolteacher definitions implicitly acknowledged the potential presence of psychological and social barriers in comments like those made by teachers below:

> *Having the ability to achieve at a task but because there is a barrier (real or perceived) they cannot/will not reach objectives* (Teacher H).
>
> *Students who have "the ability to reach the desired standard but (are) not doing so for a variety of reasons* (Teacher J).

There were no explicit references to institutional or school failure in their comments. Of the 17 definitions listed by state schoolteachers, 10 of the comments explicitly referred to student responsibility or choice being an underlying factor in underachievement. Key words and phrases from these comments included references to failure to achieve potential, lack of engagement and, as one respondent put it:

> *I would define underachievement in this context as a student who fails to exhibit work and skills that they should be capable of-E.G. have no physical or intellectual barrier* (Teacher C).

This omission may indicate that when formulating their working definitions, the state schoolteachers did not connect student underachievement with a failure on the school or teachers to provide a relevant curriculum for students who were not engaging with learning or meeting benchmarks. A possible exception to this was one teacher's comment which indicated that underachieving students *don't have a go*, and *don't see the value of the learning context* (Teacher E).

Data from the questionnaire indicated that teachers made correlations between underachievement and lack of engagement. However, respondents did not appear to use this question to reflect on or make a critical appraisal of the learning content or pedagogy presented in their schools and classrooms, although references to student difficulties when meeting benchmarks or standards were present in their responses to other questions. Teacher consideration of background factors or barriers were included in the examples used to help define underachievement.

4.5.2 Questionnaire section 3: Q 11-Factors used in identification

Table 4.10 includes data on factors teachers considered significant when they were identifying underachieving students. Teacher responses to the six categories listed were evenly distributed. Teachers acknowledged that non-completion of tasks, organisation, literacy and numeracy barriers, lack of

engagement in learning and behavioural challenges were all noticeable factors in the identification of underachieving students. Not all teachers considered all factors equally significant. However, the differences between less significant factors were also quite evenly balanced among respondents.

Table 4.10

Factors Teachers Consider Significant when Identifying Students

DESCRIPTOR	CS FREQUENCY	SS FREQUENCY	AS FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Student rarely completes tasks in classroom	8	14	22	18.48%
The student struggles with organisation and learning	9	12	21	17.64%
The student presents with behavioural challenges	8	12	20	16.80%
Student does not complete tasks for assessment	7	12	19	15.96%
The student is often disengaged	5	14	19	15.96%
The student presents with literacy/ numeracy barriers	7	11	18	15.12%
The student does not engage at stage level but attempts activities designed for lower year level	Not asked in pilot survey	9	N/A	-
TOTAL			119	99.96%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n =34.* CS = Catholic Schools. SS = State Schools. AS = All Schools. Percentage calculated to the second decimal place.

Section 3, Question 11 in the questionnaire asked teachers whether students engaged in activities that were adjusted or catered to a younger year level and ability. This category was only included in the amended questionnaire presented to state schoolteachers and the lower figure can be attributed to the fact that it was distributed to fewer respondents.

4.5.3 Questionnaire section 3: Q 12 Factors influencing identification

Teachers were also asked to indicate factors they believed to be the most significant when identifying academic underachievement. This item was an open-ended question asked in Catholic and the state schoolteacher questionnaire. Themes emerging from responses for Questions 12 and 13 fell predominantly within five main categories, with three teachers indicating that all characteristics were important. The five themes and categories that emerged from open-ended responses reflected the descriptors provided in Question 12- which required teachers to indicate significant factors in the identification of an academic underachiever.

Responses were categorised into themes of disengagement, lack of participation, non-completion of assessment tasks and homework, behavioural concerns, and literacy and numeracy barriers. The last category included a variety of miscellaneous comments that related to external factors that teachers considered influenced or indicated student underachievement in the classroom.

Disengagement was a strong theme in the responses from both Catholic and state schoolteachers and appeared to be closely connected to the completion of work tasks and activities. Comments made regarding

disengagement suggested that some teachers believed that student disengagement had an element of personal choice. One teacher made the comment that:

> *The most challenging is the student who won't have a go. The others you can find strategies for* (Teacher G).

Another teacher wrote:

> *Often there is a choice made about school. They may not like it. The underlying issue is usually related to literacy, numeracy, learning barriers. Disengagement. If they have made up their minds it can be difficult to turn them around* (Teacher I).

Qualitative answers provided by Catholic school teachers also noted a lack of engagement. A common theme was the non-completion of school work, with teachers noting that academic underachievers:

> *Underachieve because they don't complete work at the same pace as achieving students. I believe that this then impacts on their confidence and their 'identity as a student* (Teacher L).

Or, as one teacher wrote, underachieving students were:

> *Not completing work because they can't. They are misbehaving to cover for lack of ability* (Teacher D).

As illustrated by the comment above behavioural challenges and themes were also viewed as significant factors. These were illustrated by comments such as the following, noting that behavioural challenges:

> *Take up so much of the teacher's time and are damaging for relationships and the whole class* (Teacher M).

Teacher comments regarding behavioural challenges speculated that behavioural challenges with academic underachievers might mask a lack of ability. A teacher linked the behavioural challenges with the teaching and learning program being offered, noting:

> *If they don't get a personalised program, they are likely to misbehave so they draw less attention from teacher and students about their learning* (Teacher N).

Teachers provided detailed comments regarding literacy and numeracy barriers when considering the factors that impacted on and seemed most prevalent in the classroom. These included responses such as:

> *Literacy and numeracy barriers are most significant because our curriculum and hence engagement with the curriculum is focused on these areas* (Teacher P).

Another commented that underachieving students could:

> *Articulate really well what they need to do and what they should do in one-to-one conversation but cannot manage it in a class where there is an audience* (Teacher C).

4.5.4 Questionnaire section 3: Q13- Additional factors

This question solicited information beyond the prompts provided in question 11. The question was an open-ended response that invited teachers to comment on any factors that had not been outlined in the questionnaire. The responses included a range of comments outlining emerging themes pointing to

either personal and intrinsic factors or external and extrinsic factors indicating the presence of student underachievement.

Personal factors included student confidence and a sense of identity as a learner, lack of a positive relationship with teachers, and difficulties with concentration and focus. Teacher F commented that:

> *Some students find it difficult to concentrate for any length of time even on relatively easy tasks* (Teacher F).

Others observed a lack of organisation amongst students:

> *Organisation is an issue if they are starting behind everyone else due to lack of these skills* (Teacher M).

External factors included inconsistent school attendance, large class size, teacher skill set, limited resources, few teacher aides, lack of home support for schooling, social factors, peer pressure, and developmental barriers and difficulties. The prevalence of teacher comments regarding low levels of student engagement and participation, limited support from home and an apparent low value placed on education, highlighted the background factors that impacted on student achievement. Resources, structures, time and supports were also noted, as illustrated by Teacher J's following response:

> *Teacher's aides are so thin on the ground, that it is virtually impossible to use them in conjunction with any strategies for underachieving students. They are used in classrooms, which have students in the SDR (Special Disability) register only. In an ideal world, I would love to have an aide to help me with underachieving students.*

She concluded that teachers were:

Generally faced with a lack of resources for support (Teacher J).

4.6 Questionnaire Section 4: Practice

Questions included within the questionnaire on practice asked teachers to identify who they would choose to collaborate with and helpful practices that when working with academic underachievers.

4.6.1 Questionnaire section 4: Question 14- Teacher collaboration

Table 4.11 includes data on groups teachers chose to collaborate with when working with underachieving young adolescents. As with other questions on the questionnaire, respondents were invited to list all personnel they would choose to collaborate with when teaching students who were not achieving expected outcomes. The most frequent group teachers collaborated with were parents and carers. A total of 29 of the 34 teachers indicated that they would seek to collaborate with parents and/or carers. The next highest group was colleague teachers, with 26 teachers choosing to collaborate initially with their colleagues and then teacher aides.

The data indicates that all teachers in the sample used collaboration as a support strategy when working with underachieving students, claiming that they would collaborate with a range of groups, with school leaders being the least frequent choice.

Table 4.11

Teacher Collaboration

DESCRIPTORS	CS FREQUENCY	SS FREQUENCY	AS FREQUENCY	AS PERCENTAGE
Parents/carers	10	19	29	21.01%
Colleague teachers	10	16	26	18.84%
Teacher aides	6	18	24	17.39%
Year level or faculty leaders	6	16	22	15.94%
Learning support professionals	7	12	19	13.76%
School leadership team	3	15	18	13.04%
TOTAL			138	99.98%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n =34.* CS = Catholic Schools. SS = State Schools. AS = All Schools. Percentage calculated to the second decimal place.

The questionnaire given to the Catholic schoolteachers from Fidelis College provided the opportunity for teachers to comment on their preferences for collaboration. Teachers noted that colleague teachers shared information and could offer advice with learning and pedagogy. This was illustrated in the following comments:

> *Colleagues teaching the same student could give a clearer picture of the student overall* (Teacher P).
>
> *Colleague teachers teaching the same student provide good practical ideas on what does and doesn't work* (Teacher Q).

Teachers from Fidelis College believed that parents and family were significant to success in teaching academic underachievers as:

> *If they are keen for the students to achieve, then a consistent message can be sent* (Teacher R).

However, finally, as a teacher from Fidelis College outlined:

> *All or any of these can be helpful depending on individual students and their needs* (Teacher S).

4.6.2 Questionnaire section 4: Question 15- Strategies

All teachers were asked to indicate the strategies they considered most helpful when working with underachieving students. However, there were some adjustments made to the state school teacher questionnaire. The data has been presented in two tables. Table 4.12 includes questions asked of all 34 respondents. Table 4.13 includes data gathered from the teachers who responded to the amended questions on the state teacher questionnaire.

The data displayed in Table 4.12 indicates that teachers believed curriculum adjustments and modifications were preferred strategies accounting for around 30% of all responses. The second most popular choice indicated adjusting or changing pedagogies with this category accounting for another 30% of the total number of responses. Fewer teachers chose the remaining three options. Collaborating or communicating with parents and carers accounted for less than 19%, and peer coaching for under 15%. Six teachers listed tutoring as a preferred support working with underachieving students and this final option accounted for around 7% of all responses tabled.

Table 4.12

Teacher Practice

DESCRIPTORS	CS FREQUENCY	SS FREQUENCY	AS FREQUENCY	AS PERCENTAGE
Curriculum adjustments and modifications	9	17	26	30.58%
Change of pedagogical style	8	17	25	29.41%
Parent-teacher conferences	8	8	16	18.82%
Use of peer support or peer coaching	4	8	12	14.11%
Tutoring student outside of individual lesson time	4	2	6	7.05%
TOTAL			85	99.97%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n=34.* CS = Catholic Schools. SS = State Schools. AS = All Schools. Percentage calculated to the second decimal place

Data from questionnaires provided to state schoolteachers presented in Table 4.13 provided strong indicators that teachers considered the following practices helpful: support from a teacher aide and one on one tutoring within the classroom, building a positive teacher- student relationship, and use of technology within the classroom. Just over half of the respondents found use of technology within the classroom of value. However, implementing sanctions (such as detentions), had only three state school teacher respondents agreeing that such a strategy would be considered helpful. This response accounted for less than 6% of all responses tabled.

Table 4.13

State School Teacher Practice

DESCRIPTORS	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Use of teacher aide or volunteer to work one-on-one with student	15	0.2830	28.3%
Further development of teacher/student relationship	14	0.2641	26.41%
One-on-one tutoring of the student within the classroom lesson	12	0.2264	22.64%
Use of technology within classroom and lesson	9	0.1698	16.98%
Sanctions for non-compliance (E.g. Detentions)	3	0.0566	5.66%
TOTAL	53		99.99%

Note. Base number of teachers: *n =23.*

4.6.3 Questionnaire section 4: Question 16-Elaboration on strategies

With this specific question, teachers were invited to expand on why they believed the strategies outlined would be helpful. As outlined in Chapter 3, section 3.7, comments were coded and classified within categories. Five main categories emerged. The categories were: curriculum differentiation and adjustments; pedagogical adjustments; use of teacher aides to assist with one-to-one collaboration in the classroom; communicating with parents; and building relationships. Common threads surfacing from findings were student engagement, development of trust, building success and adjusting curriculum and pedagogies to enable achievement.

Teachers commented on curriculum differentiation and adjustments noting that:

> *Without adjusting the curriculum, students sometimes can't have success* (Teacher M).

Teacher D noted that it was difficult for underachieving students to gain:

> An *understanding of all the curriculum in the year level, so it must be modified* (Teacher D).

Adjustments in curriculum could encourage a change in attitude or develop motivation within the student. References to pedagogies and adjustments, and the challenges teachers faced balancing adjustments with delivering a standardised curriculum was evident in this teacher's comment:

> *A blend of strategies is always necessary and the blend that is successful with any one student will depend on the student. The most important factor is for them to achieve some success with the work. This is very difficult under the Australian Curriculum grade level and ABCDE rating system* (Teacher O).

Another teacher indicated that teachers needed to be prepared to undertake:

> *A change of pedagogical style and break tasks into smaller chunks that students can manage* (Teacher T).

Additionally, teachers needed to:

> *Adapt/modify/change teaching styles and 'learning and doing tasks' for different students and different classes* (Teacher J).

As with comments noted in previous open-ended questions, themes of success, relationships, achievement and trust surfaced in the comments that supported collaboration with teacher aides to assist students. This collaboration could be with a teacher aide or:

> *Another adult to help unpack the task for the student and walk them through it, helps with a sense of achievement* (Teacher G).

Teacher aides were viewed as:

> *A wonderful support, particularly if they have a positive connection with the student* (Teacher F).

Developing trusting relationships with teacher aides was viewed positively by teachers as helpful when working with underachieving students although there were caveats to this. Teacher aides were valued for the one-on-one support they provided to the student. As one teacher commented, having an aide in class to provide one on one support can be invaluable as:

> *In class, it can be difficult to focus on one student for long periods of time. There are nearly always three or more needing help as well as the rest of the class* (Teacher I).

Ultimately, teacher aides were perceived as a supportive addition to the teacher in the class for providing the one-on-one support that teachers believed helped address the underachieving student's needs.

Teachers commented on the necessity of building positive relationships with students and linked this with improved trust and the potential to allow the student to achieve success:

Good relationships nearly always help bringing trust, respect and confidence (Teacher D).

Without a relationship with the student you have little hope of helping them improve (Teacher M).

Parents were also viewed as potentially supportive but some teachers, qualified their comments regarding home-school partnerships, commenting that:

G*etting parents on board (those that are supportive) I find essential* (Teacher M).

In relationship to parent teacher conferences, usually the parents have been an underachiever themselves at school (Teacher I).

Another teacher saw the development of trust as being the underpinning structure or ingredient necessary to encourage engagement and to enable other supports and strategies to effect positive change:

In my experience, it is my belief that students need to build trust and to feel safe to make mistakes. Changing pedagogical style and curriculum modifications are needed but will not help if the student refuses to engage in what you have modified… Students try their hardest when they build a trusting relationship with their teacher and/or an aide. They need to be able to ask questions in detail without fear of ridicule. They also need to see and hear and they have a better chance of that when working individually (Teacher C).

4.7 Teacher Perceptions: Identifying Characteristics

While the data indicated that teachers used a range of indicators in the identification of underachieving students, four major themes emerged that reoccurred in both the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire. These themes included disengagement and low participation in learning, limited or low work output, literacy or numeracy difficulties and the presence of challenging behaviour or avoidant behaviour.

When elaborating on disengagement with learning, teachers identified young adolescent underachievers as students who demonstrated a general lack of engagement and participation in schooling which could include non-attendance. The teachers' perceptions were that these students demonstrated inconsistent or low task completion both in and outside of the classroom noting that they often did not complete or submit homework. Other factors identified by teachers included literacy and numeracy difficulties, with academic underachievers demonstrating difficulties accessing the standard curriculum or meeting the standard expected without curriculum adjustments. Teachers commented that these students also had difficulties when maintaining the same pace or rate of work as other students in their cohorts or year levels.

The teachers indicated that academic underachievers displayed behavioural challenges. Little detail was provided by teachers as to the extent or nature of behavioural issues shown by students but the presence of these concerns was a consistent theme in the teachers' responses. Other factors teachers used to identify an academic underachiever were a lack of confidence and poor organisational skills.

Themes of disengagement, poor work output or low effort, the presence of literacy and numeracy barriers and behavioural concerns consistently received high scores in the data findings from quantitative questions. These themes also appeared in greater frequency in qualitative responses. Furthermore, literacy and numeracy difficulties for students in these year levels were highlighted as a key concern within the literature (Chadbourne, 2001; Jones & Myhill, 2010) including the seminal report released by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training 'Beyond the Middle' (Luke et al., 2003).

4.8 Teacher Perspectives: Significant Factors

Factors that teachers identified as common among academic underachievers were compared with the qualitative definitions for academic underachievement provided by state schoolteachers. Teacher respondents appeared to subscribe to a definition of underachievement that predominantly focused on low or limited achievement in meeting age and stage level learning outcomes. State schoolteacher definitions described academic underachievement in similar terms to those found in McCall et al (1992) or Krause and Krause's definition (1981), where academic underachievers fail to achieve year or grade level standards deemed appropriate for the age group or cohort or student's predicted ability.

Themes emerging from the state schoolteacher definitions of underachievement included lack of effort and low participation and engagement with learning, literacy and numeracy difficulties, failure to meet the standard

and failure to meet potential. These themes support the findings of Krause and Krause (1981), Griffin (1988), McCall (1992) and McCall et al (1994). Data from section 3 (Q9-12) provided more information on the broader themes, with detail on correlating factors that occurred with students demonstrating academic underachievement. These included poor relationships between teacher and student, inability to concentrate, engage with and complete tasks and activities, and a low value placed on education overall.

Teacher definitions did not appear to correlate academic underachievement with systemic failure or specific educational philosophies or programs (Gonski, 2011; OECD, 1994). The data indicated that some of the teacher respondents had taken background factors into consideration when identifying academic underachievers. However, the respondents did not appear to question whether the term underachievement could be legitimately and equitably applied to students with very different background circumstances or abilities, as outlined by Gorard and Smith (2004, 2013) and Jones and Myhill (2010). Data emerging from questions relating to teacher beliefs confirmed that some of the teachers believed that a lack of confidence and self-belief or sense of an identity as a learner impacted significantly on student outcomes. This supported the findings of Dweck (2006), Wentzel (1997), Wentzel et al., (2017), and Carr et al., (1991), who have noted that student attributions regarding achievement and persistence in overcoming difficulties and setbacks may have a significant influence on student outcomes.

4.9 Teacher Practice: Addressing Academic Underachievement

Findings from section 4(Q 14-16) indicated that teachers valued using curriculum adjustments and changes in pedagogies when working with underachieving students in Year 7 and 8. The final question invited teachers to comment or elaborate on their previous responses regarding supportive practices. However, while the findings suggested that teachers placed a high value on curriculum adjustments, differentiation and changes to pedagogies, teacher comments supporting these practices outlined a relatively small range of strategies and approaches. These included adjusting the curriculum and pedagogies for the student by breaking up tasks and activities into smaller components, adapting delivery styles, and personalising tasks to suit student interests. Developing a supportive relationship between teacher and student, building trust so that academic underachievers were willing to take risks and engage with the curriculum and learning were also listed as practices that teachers valued and used within the classroom. Engagement with learning was prioritised in initial responses but teacher responses and comments regarding curriculum and pedagogies did not mention specific details about how to increase student engagement other than tailoring assessment and learning activities to the underachieving student's personal interests.

Data collected on strategies and practices used by teachers also included collaboration as a strategy or practice. Specific questions asked teachers whether they collaborated or consulted with groups or individuals, when working with an underachieving student in Year 7 and 8. Teachers indicated that they did choose to consult with a range of individuals and groups including

parents and carers, colleague teachers, teacher aides, support personnel and school middle and senior leaders. Teachers reported that they valued collaboration with colleague teachers, parents and carers and teacher aides, although the data indicated that they consulted with all groups listed in the descriptors.

Colleague teachers provided new perspectives on the student and could provide practical strategies or guidance if they also taught the same student. Consultations with parents could assist with setting common expectations regarding students, although as noted by one teacher, sometimes parents themselves were 'underachievers' or did not value education.

Teacher aides were viewed as someone to collaborate with and as a classroom 'resource' or support. Teachers appeared to value teacher aide support especially within the classroom to allow one-to-one tutoring of students to assist them in accessing the learning activity or program. This may have provided support to the student and assistance to the teacher working with all students in the classroom.

4.10 Middle Years' Models of Practice

When asked to indicate teaching approaches and philosophies one state school teacher indicated a subscription to a middle years' model of practice when teaching Year 7 and 8 students. Other teachers indicated that they followed a 'student-centred' approach or were predominantly subject or curriculum focused.

Teacher understanding of middle schooling pedagogies and practices included the use of approaches identified as successful components of middle years' practice such as flexibility with the delivery of curriculum and adapting pedagogies (Jacobs, 2010; Pendergast, 2010; Pendergast, 2016), setting clear expectations (Raphael, Pressley, & Mohan, 2008) and building positive relationships between student and teacher (Pendergast, 2010; Raphael et al, 2008; Wentzel, 1997). Communication with parents and carers was also listed as a significant strategy to improve outcomes for academic underachievers (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Other strategies that aligned with middle years' models of practice, such as teacher teaming to develop links across curricula and subjects (Jacobs, 2010), developing community partnerships (Hattie, 2012), or using constructivist or middle years' approaches, curricula and pedagogies (Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Jacobs, 2010; Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Shanks & Dowden, 2013) were not outlined or referred to by teacher respondents. Many teachers completing the questionnaires did not indicate that they were aware that these strategies could form part of a middle years' approach to working with students.

4.11 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter presented the findings from a questionnaire circulated to a selection of Catholic and state schools in regional Tasmania, collecting quantitative and qualitative data on teacher experiences, perspectives, and practices when identifying and supporting young adolescent academic underachievers. Quantitative data was processed using descriptive statistics and presented in frequency tables (Creswell, 2005), while qualitative data was

processed and interpreted using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Findings indicated that teachers used four primary indicators to identify academic underachievers in their classrooms. These four indicators included limited participation and engagement with learning and schooling; not completing assignments or assessment activities; challenging or avoidant behaviour; and mild literacy and numeracy difficulties. Teachers defined academic underachievers as students who did not meet, or were struggling to meet the year level standard and who did not qualify for funding or consideration based on special learning needs.

Teacher perspectives about working with academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8, were evenly divided between describing teaching young adolescents as either rewarding or rewarding but challenging. Teachers also tended to describe themselves and their teaching approach as either focused on meeting the needs of the individual learner or as being primarily task, subject and curriculum focussed.

Teachers believed that improving relationships, developing trust and a sense of confidence with students and being flexible with the curriculum, would assist academic underachievers. They advocated adjusting pedagogies to allow students to manage their learning through strategies such as scaffolding and stepping through tasks. Teachers also advocated collaboration as a strategy to support underachievers, with about half of the teachers confirming that they found communication with parents to be effective. Teachers strongly advocated collaboration with teacher aides but this collaboration was limited. Teachers used this strategy to allow the student more one-on-one time with the teacher

aide, which allowed the teacher more time to manage other aspects of learning in the classroom.

Few teachers appeared to refer to middle years' philosophies or pedagogies explicitly but some of the strategies outlined, including the focus on strong relationships, developing trust and flexibility with the curriculum would fit within middle schooling pedagogies and approaches (Pendergast & Danby, 2011; Pendergast et al., 2005; Richardson, 2003). Findings from the data also appeared to support a tacit understanding that academic underachievers struggled to connect with the curriculum and learning program offered. However, the provision of constructivist or middle years' curricula as outlined by Dowden (2007) and Richardson (2003), and collaboration beyond communications with parents and the assistance of teacher aides, was not strongly evident in the data. Given that mild but noticeable literacy and numeracy barriers were also noted as present in underachieving students, it may be that teachers believed that literacy and numeracy barriers had more impact on student ability to connect with classroom learning than any specific philosophical underpinnings of the structure of the curriculum.

Qualitative findings indicated that teachers were aware of some of the needs of the young adolescent academic underachievers they taught. Teachers identified a range of barriers preventing underachieving students from achieving success. They appeared to measure student success against specific standards, using Australian or Tasmanian curriculum subject criteria as benchmarks. Teachers indicated that they employed a range of strategies to address the perceived needs of academic underachievers. There were less

evidence in the data that teachers considered the specific developmental needs of young adolescent learners to be a relevant factor with academic underachievers.

The next chapter, Chapter 5, presents the second set of data for the study. These data are gathered from a survey of a Year 7 cohort students from Constantius College. The findings address the second research question, which seeks to identify factors that young adolescents consider significant to their learning in their first year of secondary school.

Chapter 5: Data Set 2-Student Perspectives

One thing I worry about at school with my work is how well I go. As in my mark for that piece of work, so I can see how well I went or how bad (Bridie).

5.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter presents findings from data collected from 178 students in Year 7 from Constantius College. This data set shed light on student perspectives regarding learning in their first year of secondary school. Data gathered addressed Research Question 2: What factors do young adolescents identify as significant to their learning?

Data were gathered using a reflection sheet as an instrument, which was completed by students as part of a school-based workshop focused on learner confidence. (See Appendix J for a copy of the Reflection Sheet). The chapter presents the data gathered from the instrument in four sections. Each section presents the data from one of four open-ended statements on the sheet.

Sections include a frequency table that displays the categorical data obtained from the specific statement addressed. Samples of individual student responses to statements are italicised. The data presents information regarding concerns around school work; identified challenges; supportive strategies; and what students believed the school might do to assist. Methodologies for collecting, processing and analysing data in this data set was outlined in detail in Chapter 3, sections 3.7, 3.8 and 3.9. A copy of the instructions for teacher-led

activities introduced to students prior to completing the reflection tool has been included in Appendix I.

5.2 Presentation of Findings from Student Survey

Results for this chapter include both qualitative findings and categorical data presented through frequency tables. These were used to analyse and interpret responses and themes. The qualitative methodology incorporated an inductive thematic analysis, using a latent approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, data were transcribed, categorised and then re-categorised into themes. Student themes and categories were then placed in a table and a frequency count of similar codes was listed on the table.

Quantitative findings have been organised and presented using frequency tables which show the frequency count or tally for each type of response, as well as the relative frequency value and the percentage value for each individual response. Findings were then compared to the total number of categories appearing in all responses (Creswell, 2005; McCormick et al., 2015). A detailed description of the process can be found in Chapter 3, section 3.8.

A summary describing and interpreting findings for the student survey has been included after each table. Following this is a discussion section that outlines the codes and categories emerging from the qualitative data. This discussion highlights the major themes of the study and connect findings and results from each separate set of data across all three data sets, before these are explored more fully and in greater depth within Chapter 7. The chapter

then concludes with a summary that addresses Research Question 2 before concluding and introducing the next data set and chapter. Scores presented in tables have been calculated to the second decimal place using relative frequency scores and to the first decimal place with percentages, which have not been rounded up.

5.2.1 Survey statement 1-Student concerns with schoolwork

Table 5. 1 includes findings from student comments taken from the first statement on the sheet, which asked students to complete the statement: *One thing I worry about at school with my work is…*

Responses from the 178 students surveyed contained a total of 252 key phrases. One student did not complete Statement 1. Findings from the data were aggregated and reduced to 13 categories, with six themes emerging overall. Many responses to Statement 1 included concerns regarding academic ability. A small minority of concerns referred to class behaviour management issues, student teacher relationships or concerns with peer opinions. This figure amounted to three comments made by three students from the cohort of 177 students who responded.

Table 5.1

Student Concerns with Schoolwork

DESCRIPTORS	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Ability to complete work in allocated time	90	0.357	35.71%
Work not up to standard	45	0.178	17.85%
Homework	28	0.111	11.11%
Tidiness and presentation	21	0.083	8.33%
Comprehension of task	19	0.075	7.53%
Consequences for lack of achievement	15	0.059	5.95%
Forgetting-work and/or instructions	8	0.031	3.17%
Mathematics ability	8	0.031	3.17%
Behaviour related concerns	6	0.023	2.38%
Literacy	6	0.023	2.38%
Focus/ concentration	3	0.011	1.19%
Peer opinions	2	0.007	0.70%
Teacher student relationship	1	0.003	0.39%
TOTAL	252		99.86%

Note. Base frequency count of all responses: n=252. Number of students responding to statement 1: n=177. Percentage calculated to the second decimal place.

Approximately 1 in every 2 students of the 177 respondents worried about their ability to complete tasks and activities in the time allocated.

Students commented on their ability to access and understand the learning and then to complete activities, making comments such as:

> *I am slow, and sometimes I don't understand and I don't get my homework done on time* (Josh).

Esther wrote of a concern with:

> *Not finishing my work because I don't understand what I'm meant to do.*

Cissy stated:

> *One thing I worry about at school with my work is forgetting and doing it at the last minute because I have done it before and it is stressful.*

Mitchell's concerns regarding task completion were complicated by a health issue:

> *I worry that I can't complete my work because I'm gonna be in hospital.*

Cally wrote*:*

> *The one thing that I worry about with my schoolwork is that I won't get it done in time or that it won't be at the level that I want it at*.

The second most frequent response indicated that 1 in every 4 students surveyed worried about their academic ability, fearing that they were not working to the best of their ability and/or meeting the standard required. Comments included fear of failure and concerns regarding low achievement affecting future options, with students like Kathy worrying:

> *That it is not good enough and I fail and I'll stress out.*

Students frequently used the words 'good' or 'bad', 'quality', 'standard' and 'grades' in relation to their school work. Like Jasper and Ellie, they wondered

about the level of their work in relation to what was expected and whether they had completed enough:

Is it a good enough quality or have I got enough of it done? (Jasper).

I worry that I won't get it done and it won't be good enough (Ellie).

Students were concerned both about the standard of their work and how it would be assessed:

I worry about … not being up to Grade 7 standard; not having acceptable handwriting, and also about not completing my work on time (Tash).

Sally summed up her overall concerns by writing:

I worry that I will never get an A in my whole time at Constantius.

Angus's concern also related to ability:

I used to be really smart at school. Now I've dropped and I don't know why.

Twenty-eight students from the sample were worried about their ability to complete and manage homework. This figure accounted for 11.1% of the total number of responses. Students indicated a concern in relation to keeping up with ongoing homework or accidentally forgetting to complete assigned tasks. Homework appeared to cast a long shadow for students like Emma:

I worry about not getting it done even if I am listening and working well that It will become even MORE homework.

Jonathan commented:

I hate homework so much. Why? It stresses me out and makes me depressed.

Homework comments were also often connected to comments about time management, ability and anxiety:

I put a lot of effort into all my work so it might take me longer to write and finish it so it means I have a lot more homework. Sometimes I worry if I have a lot of homework I can't finish it all (Rosie).

Students also worried about untidy handwriting and their ability to present work neatly. More than 8% of the total number of responses indicated a concern with presentation and, as Cora had written *being messy*. Like Annie, these students wondered:

If my work is neat enough?

Generally, comments about presentation and neatness included simple descriptions repeating terms such as *neat, well-presented work* (Inez), while Helen observed that her *work* wasn't *looking its best*.

Almost one in every 10 students in the cohort were concerned about task and activity comprehension. One student wrote that:

I worry that I won't get how to do the work (Corey).

Ettie articulated her concern about her understanding of tasks and activities:

I'm really slow and sometimes I don't understand.

Dale expressed similar concerns:

Sometimes I don't listen well and when we do our work I don't know what to do and sometimes I don't do my work properly.

The comments illustrate that many of the Year 7 students surveyed, held prominent concerns and anxiety around academic ability, managing to complete both formative and summative work for assessment (including homework) in the time given, and their ability to understand and connect with the learning in

the classroom. A small number of student comments connected a concern about meeting grade standard with future outcomes:

I worry that is not good enough and I won't get my dream job if I don't do well enough (Karen).

5.2.2 Survey statement 2-Student challenges

Table 5. 2 includes findings from student comments taken from the second item on the reflection sheet, which asked students to complete the statement: *A challenge that I have is…*

Student responses to Statement 2 indicated that they believed key challenges included their ability to engage, understand and connect with the curriculum or the learning activities presented to them. These results were distributed more evenly than responses noted for Statement 1. (See Table 5.2).

In total, student responses to Statement 2 were reduced to 14 different categories. Primary challenges scoring higher results continued to show trends related to academic achievement and learning outcomes. Homework, completing tasks and activities, maintaining focus, learner confidence, engagement and managing organisational routines and resources were the items most frequently outlined by students in their survey responses. Student comments again alluded to the ever-present bogeyman of 'homework'. They wrote statements that outlined their difficulties in managing homework:

A challenge that I face is that my homework won't get done on time (Cora).

Student responses indicated that they accepted their responsibility to manage homework effectively:

Keeping on top of homework like when I don't do it and then I get more and more homework (Ella).

Table 5.2

Challenges Identified by Students

DESCRIPTORS	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Homework	35	0.145	14.52%
Completing tasks and activities	30	0.124	12.44%
Focus and Concentration	23	0.095	9.54%
Learner Confidence	23	0.095	9.54%
Ability to engage in work	21	0.087	8.71%
Managing resources & timetables	19	0.078	7.88%
Friendships	17	0.070	7.05%
Bullying or peer related concerns	15	0.062	6.22%
Organisation of learning	15	0.062	6.22%
Engagement in class activity	12	0.049	4.97%
Literacy	12	0.049	4.97%
Mathematics	9	0.037	3.73%
Other	9	0.037	3.73%
Tidiness, writing and presentation	1	0.004	0.41%
TOTAL	241		99.93%

Note. Base frequency count of all responses: *n=241.* Number of students responding to statement 2: *n=178*. Percentages calculated to second decimal place.

Students noted their own lack of confidence in their learning; 9.5% of the frequency of responses were tabled on this theme or referred specifically to learning and confidence:

Being confident in the challenges I face. Not just thinking I can't do things when I probably can (Sigrid).

Speaking in front of the people, reading out loud and being asked too many questions in case I get the answer wrong (Cam).

Or, like Esther, they alluded to challenges with a lack of confidence in approaching teachers to discuss their understanding:

Talking to teachers (about schoolwork) and people I don't know (Esther).

Peer and bullying concerns emerged as a stronger theme overall in response to the second statement even if they were not the most prevalent trend for the students. Themes and categories also included a few 'other' responses. 'Other' referred to topics such as sport or co-curricular goals or personal growth goals and challenges. Around one in every 20 students indicated that they believed student off-task behaviour such as chatting or being distracted, was a concern. Helen noted that she wanted to work on:

Not getting distracted in class so much.

While Robbie noted his efforts involved:

Not getting distracted by other people.

By reducing the first three categories from Table 5.2 into one, a theme was identified that raised concerns about this group's beliefs and perceptions about their connection to learning. Thus, the categories of focus and concentration, ability and understanding of the learning, and engagement and behaviour in class became components of a broader theme regarding access to curriculum, and engagement with both curriculum and pedagogy. If responses are considered from this perspective, 27.7% of the responses tabled (almost 1

in every 4 students), considered that access to, and engagement with classroom learning was challenging.

Students completed the second item by outlining these concerns, including Chris who wrote:

> *Concentrating in class. Sometimes I drift off task, and even though I get back on task, I shouldn't do it in the first place.*

Or, like Paula, students had difficulties with:

> *Staying focused and being 100 percent concentrated*.

One student demonstrated an awareness of the impact of social and background factors regarding access to the curriculum, noting a challenge with:

> *Understanding the work and keeping up with the rest of the class because of my background education* (Dan).

Other statements indicated students did not feel confident in their abilities to self-advocate or to understand the task:

> *To listen to the teacher and ask them what the question on our work means* (Dennis).

A smaller number of students highlighted individual subjects, topics or skills they found challenging, struggled to engage with or disliked. These subjects had either a numeracy (Mathematics) or literacy (English) focus:

> *School is very boring and English is bad* (Ian).

5.2.3 Survey statement 3-Strategies identified by students

Table 5. 3 includes findings from student comments taken from the third item on the survey, which asked students to complete the statement: *Two things I could do to help me with these challenges are…*

Responses to Statement 3 showed a strong trend on the theme of time management by improving organisation, reflecting the time management trends emerging in the data from Statement 1. Eighty students identified improved time management through strategies focusing on improved organisation of work and scheduling, as a preferred strategy (see Table 5.3). The tally of different responses to this statement recorded was 270. Comments about time management, organisation and scheduling formed 29.6% of the total number of overall responses to Statement 3. This figure represents around 45% of the students who completed this statement.

> Students appeared to recognise that they had some ability to affect a positive change when responding to this question, suggesting that they held some understanding of the significance of motivation, and the use of scheduling and study calendars. Statements students made included:
>
> *Not leaving it until the last minute. Starting earlier and focusing* (Matt).

Or, as Jasper wrote:

> *Planning ahead and setting benchmarks of where I should be at with my work.*

Many of the responses were directly linked to completion of homework and formal assessment tasks.

Table 5.3

Strategies Identified by Students

DESCRIPTORS	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Improve time management skills	80	0.296	29.62%
Practice & mastery of learning	37	0.137	13.70%
Improve focus & concentration	35	0.129	12.96%
Strategies to assist with peers or bullying	28	0.103	10.37%
Reduce off-task behaviour	26	0.096	9.62%
More effort linked to better outcomes	20	0.074	7.40%
Asking questions & seeking support	16	0.059	5.92%
Develop confidence-increase self-efficacy	13	0.048	4.81%
Other: sporting or personal goals	11	0.040	4.07%
Student/teacher personality clash	4	0.014	1.48%
TOTAL	270		99.95%

Note. Base Frequency count of all responses: *n= 270*. Number of students responding to statement 3: *n=177* students. Percentages presented up to second decimal place.

Several students like Jasper, recorded responses that indicated an awareness of the need to allocate time for homework and complete it in

advance of deadlines. Like Ella, they provided specific strategies they could implement for themselves:

Set reminders on my phone to remind me to do homework and remember to take my diary home every night.

The next most frequent comment recorded from students involved using or developing strategies that supported more effective learning. These comments comprised 13.7% of the 270 responses, and 37 students of the 177 (20.9%) who completed the third statement included a comment or response regarding this theme. The words 'study' and 'practice' were frequently noted by students. These were illustrated in their comments that noted a need to:

study more to help me remember (Oliver)

work harder at spelling and concentrate more (Patrick)

and to

write notes (Perdita).

Students also wrote that they needed to:

practice spelling a lot more (Aaron)

go to maths tutoring (Cissy)

or

try to find a book I like to read (Millie)

and

to write everything down so I don't forget it (Haley).

Another common trend referred to improved focus and concentration on learning. There were comments from 35 students (or 12.9% of the total responses), which reflected this theme. Students described the challenge as one

of listening and paying attention. The strategies they listed to help them address these concerns included statements like:

just focus and do my work properly (Hugo)

or simply

pay more attention in class (Angus)

and

listen more and ask questions (Caro).

While student comments frequently included words such as 'focus', 'concentration' and 'listening', their concern could also be viewed as a challenge to connect or engage in the learning activity or program. As noted by Dowden (2007), Shanks and Dowden (2013), Raphael et al., (2008) and Pendergast (2010), students who are engaged in learning, and find the curriculum and pedagogies meaningful and relevant, do not struggle as much to engage with learning in the classroom, to participate, or to stay awake and maintain focus.

Responses that referred to strategies to manage bullying and/or friendship or peer issues roughly correlated to the number of responses in Statement 2 that indicated that peer relationships or bullying was a concern for some students. Thirty-two students indicated that bullying or peer issues were considered a challenge in Statement 2, while in Statement 3, 10.3% of the responses (representing 28 students from the sample) indicated strategies targeted to assist with this.

Findings in the main indicated that academic achievement was the predominant concern for most students surveyed in the sample. Nevertheless, some of the students identified social and emotional concerns, including

friendships, peer or bullying issues, as challenges that impacted on their schooling. For these students, anxieties stemming from peer relationships or bullying could impact on their motivation and classroom learning. While the topic and scope of this study has not allowed for a broad exploration of the social and emotional factors impacting on student achievement, this could be the subject of future studies (as outlined in Chapter 8, section 8.5). These factors may also have impacted on teacher-student relationships, a key category that emerged from findings connected with student underachievement in other data sets in this study.

A consistent code or sub-theme emerging from responses to Statement 3 was reducing or managing off task-behaviour. This accounted for 9.6% of the total number of responses, with 26 out of the 177 students observing strategies they believed would assist in addressing this challenge. Students frequently mentioned that they could

not talk to the people around me (Kevin)

or that they should

move somewhere so I will not get distracted (Jim)

and

sit next to people that help me not get distracted (Mel).

Students noted that they needed to be able to manage aspects of their behaviour around learning in the classroom and the words ‘don’t talk’ or ‘not talk’ frequently appeared in these comments.

Twenty students, representing a figure of 7.4% of the total number of responses, connected increased effort with improved outcomes. Students made comments such as:

put my head down and work really hard (Morty)

and

try to do things to the best of my ability (Lucas).

Variations of 'work harder' were also frequent comments.

Sixteen students wrote comments, representing 5.9% of the total number of responses, relating to the need to ask for assistance or support with learning and understanding. Comments included:

asking the teacher for some help (Dennis)

or

ask for help when it comes to things I don't understand (Sadie)

as well as to

pay more attention and speak up (Selina)

and

don't be afraid to ask questions (Carrie).

The students making these comments did not make any comments about individual teachers or teaching practices. These remarks indicated learner confidence concerns and anxiety about being perceived as not 'smart' or capable (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Dweck, 1999) rather than indicating a negative teacher-student relationship.

The three lowest scoring sub-themes emerging from the student responses included the need for students to increase confidence, varying

responses relating to personal goals (e.g. sporting or extracurricular), and a small number of comments concerning the need for improved relationships with their teacher.

Thirteen students out of the 177 respondents to Statement 3 (4.94% of the 270 varying responses recorded) made comments relating to improving confidence and a sense of efficacy and positive self-belief. Thus, students wrote about

building my confidence (Ross)

and noted a need to:

just relax and think positive and ask for help if needed (Karen).

These comments might also be indicative of student awareness regarding peer influences, anxiety issues and the impact such concerns might have on learning outcomes. This can be seen in Renae's response:

Being myself around everyone and making sure people see my true personality.

Such comments also included:

Making decisions by myself and not asking others for their approval all the time. I need to be more motivated and not give up so easily (Tanya).

Eleven students wrote comments that referred to external individual goals and outcomes not directly connected to their learning or academic achievement, while only four students mentioned a concern that implicated a specific teacher or a teacher responsibility. These were responses were mainly outside of the student's control including

happier teachers (Zac)

or having a strategy to

convince Mr M not to give us so much homework (Ben).

Dennis wrote philosophically that taking

small breaks

might provide some support as well as

accepting that sucking is a part of life (Dennis).

5.2.4 Survey statement 4-School supports identified by students

The final item asked students to identify any assistance they believed the school could provide. Refer to Table 5.4.

The most frequent response, accounting for over 15% of the total number of responses, cited reducing homework as a preferred strategy. Examples included:

T*hey could give me less homework so I'll have time to study hard words* (Gemma)

Samantha's response noted that the school could:

Not set so much homework and don't make it due so early. Give at least a weekend so students have more time to complete tasks (Samantha).

Table 5.4

School Supports Identified by Students

DESCRIPTORS	FREQUENCY	RELATIVE FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Reduce homework	21	0.153	15.32%
Assistance with organisation and time-management	16	0.116	11.67%
Improve or strengthen classroom management	15	0.109	10.94%
Nothing	13	0.094	9.48%
Teacher provides targeted support	13	0.094	9.48%
More time given for tasks and homework	12	0.087	8.75%
Provide emotional support and assistance with bullying	11	0.080	8.02%
Improve teacher-student relationships	5	0.036	3.64%
Don't know	4	0.029	2.91%
Provide tutoring	3	0.021	2.18%
Make learning & teaching more engaging	2	0.014	1.45%
Use technology to enhance Learning	2	0.014	1.45%
Change groups or class	2	0.014	1.45%
Reduce pressure	1	0.007	0.07%
Other	17	0.124	12.40%
TOTAL	137		99.21%

Note. Base frequency count of all responses*: n= 137.* Number of students responding to statement: *n=130* students. Percentages presented up to second decimal place.

Sixteen students (8.83% of the total number of responses) explicitly requested school support to assist them with managing their time and the organisational structures of Year 7.

A consistent number of students overall recorded responses that indicated students wanted more time, improved classroom management, or they thought teachers might be able to provide more directed teaching that would assist them to manage their learning and completion of tasks. Responses included:

> *Something that the school could do that would help me is by helping me more in class and not ignoring me* (Joe).
>
> *Help with my school work and explain things better to me* (Candace).

Heidi wrote:

> *Help me in my schoolwork because I struggle in some subjects*.

Haley suggested that:

> *The school could make sure that there were not so many things happening at once so we can remember things easier.*

Eleven students (or 6.17 % of all responses) indicated that the school could provide further pastoral support to help manage anxiety, peer issues and bullying concerns. Mariam wrote that the school could:

> *Make a big effort to make sure everything is alright with everyone. E.g.: social problems.*

Isabelle wrote:

> *They can talk to people. They can help me stop having panic attacks and help me to calm down.*

Seventeen students (or 9.39%) made suggestions included within the category of 'Other'. These comments included an imaginative selection of improvements ranging from painting the halls pink to inventing a machine that could do the work. Students also made comments suggesting that the school

get rid of all stairs (Jess).

Another student wrote:

I think they could help by having less stairs (Polly).

These students attended the one Year 7 class that was located on a second level within the school with access to the classroom only available by climbing a flight of stairs. The comments may have been written with a sense of fun or irony, nevertheless, comments included references to access, feeling rushed, and safety and time pressures, all of which are significant considerations for any school and group of students.

Overall 130 students recorded a response to Statement 4. A total of 48 students (around 27%) did not respond and 4 students indicated that they did not know. The responses that were recorded for Statement 4 were the least developed of all 4 open-ended statements. As one student wrote when asked to consider school supports:

Nothing. Because it is up to me to make it happen and be in control of my life and work (Warren).

The large amount of missing data from Statement 4, added to written responses such as

nothing I can think of (Mal)

or

I don't know (Esther)

may have indicated that the students believed that the challenges identified were largely their own responsibility to manage. Alternatively, given this was the last question on the survey sheet, no response may have indicated that not all students had enough time to complete all 4 questions in the time allocated, or perhaps did not understand the question. Given also that a larger number of student responses to this question were less developed than their previous responses to Statements 1-3, this may have been the case. However, it could be equally likely that many students in the sample had not considered what the school might do to improve things and required more time and preparation to include a response to this statement.

Most student responses, as with previous questions, alluded to concerns with time management, homework, organisation, meeting the standard and classroom participation:

> *They have been great but being marked on spelling and neatness and punctuation is tough. So... if I wasn't that would be great* (Jeremy).

5.3 Student Perspectives

Main categories emerging from findings from student data included 'meeting the standard', 'connecting to learning', and 'barriers and challenges'. 'Meeting the standard' included phrases and key words that focused on being up to the standard, or being *where I want to be* and being good enough to pass or to achieve 'higher' grades. While students did use words and phrases that mentioned the standard, they did not use the terms 'curriculum' or 'learning

program'. Their responses indicated that they perceived their work represented a fixed standard that they needed to master or use as a benchmark.

Connecting to learning included comments about a lack of confidence in students' ability to connect to and access or understand key curriculum content and processes so they could participate in class and learning activities. This theme also included references to engagement, maintaining focus in class, not being distracted, and being able to complete homework and organisation. Comments relating to organisation also referred to managing timetables and structures, lockers and resources and transitions between lessons. Organisation included comments that indicated students would appreciate support with managing transitions and processes implemented by the school and the teachers.

Barriers and challenges raised by students included phrases that referred to meeting deadlines for assignments and activities, using time effectively in class and completing tasks in the time allocated for activities, assessment and homework. Students' perceptions were that they had limited opportunities to exert control over environmental and structural elements, and limited flexibility around negotiating learning outcomes. Thus, managing assignment deadlines and the completion of tasks and activities appeared to be a barrier to 'meeting the standard' and 'connecting to learning'.

Learner confidence amounted to students feeling comfortable about asking questions in class or indicating to the teacher that they did not understand a concept or activity. It also included the ability to self-advocate, if needed, with

peers, friends and teachers This category also included comments that indicated whether students believed that they were in control of their learning or were moving towards being independent learners. Some student responses indicated that they believed that teachers could do more to facilitate student understanding and engagement by explaining things further, being more supportive and prepared to negotiate around deadlines and homework. Additionally, as one student commented, teachers could:

Make the work we do sound more interesting than it actually is (Tanika).

Students also used key words and phrases which centred on anxiety regarding teacher-student relationships, getting on with peers, managing friendships and not being distracted by others in the class. These comments indicate that student perceptions regarding fitting in with peers could potentially have a negative impact on their learning.

5.4 Factors Influencing Learning

Findings from this set of data suggest that the large majority of student participants were concerned about academic achievement. These findings support the findings of Towns (2011) and Evangelou et al., (2008) amongst others. The Year 7 students in this study arrived at secondary school hoping to meet the standard; to connect to what was presented in class and to learn. These broad concerns included more specific factors including access to the learning within the classroom, the ability to organise and manage resources, and the use of strategies to empower themselves to become more effective

learners. Findings indicated that the majority of Year 7 students in the sample wanted to connect with and actively participate in classroom learning activities.

Barriers and challenges perceived by the students in the study, included concerns around time management, concerns about maintaining focus and understanding what was happening in the classroom. Behaviour management, bullying and peer friendships were identified by students as factors that impacted on their learning. They were, however, perceived as secondary factors, distracting the students from their primary focus of learning and academic attainment. The primary concerns for the students were academic attainment and achievement and managing the academic transition from primary to secondary school.

Initial findings from Data Set 2 suggested that students required their teachers to slow down their delivery of the curriculum and focus on pacing and on developing student understanding and to explicitly teach organisational strategies to students. Findings from this data set also suggest that these strategies could assist in addressing student concerns in a practical and immediate sense. However, a thematic analysis of findings and themes elicited from the data revealed student concerns with confidence around their access to curriculum and pedagogy used in the classroom and understanding of assessment and learning requirements. Also of note were student perceptions that their learning was measured against an externally imposed and fixed standard, which they were not always certain of achieving or perhaps did not fully comprehend.

The school's learning program offered discrete disciplines and subjects for Year 7 and four subjects had recently been rewritten and/or revised to align with the newly introduced Australian Curriculum (TCEO, 2012b). Where Australian Curriculum Standards were formalised, students were assessed against year and stage standards in those subjects. Findings indicated that students had questions about the effectiveness of their teachers' practices in these subjects and were seeking to find ways to connect more deeply and productively with their subject and classroom learning programs.

Within the Australian Curriculum there has been an acknowledgement of the significance of middle years' educational practices for students in Year 7 and 8 to enable students to engage, participate and connect with learning. For example, teachers might include rich tasks and inquiry or project-based learning in their programs which encourage students to develop a deeper engagement and understanding of the concepts and curriculum offered. Learner-centred curriculum (Dowden, 2007) could be implemented based on exploring big concepts, or multi-disciplinary curriculum designed around topics explored through the lenses of different subjects (Jacobs, 2010). These types of learning programs and practices would provide opportunities for negotiated tasks, flexible outcomes and the inquiry or project based learning that provides a connection between the classroom learning environment to the world of the student beyond school (Hunter & Forrest, 2010) and with their immediate community (Beane, 2015, Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016).

As can be seen in Chapter 4, section 4, teachers participating in this study did not appear to subscribe to the perspective that Year 7 and 8 students would

benefit from such practices or pedagogies. Few teachers appeared to hold the explicit belief that constructivist or learner-centered curriculum (Dowden, 2007) combined with middle years' pedagogies and practices would assist to create a more productive, engaging and manageable learning environment for young adolescents (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2010; Dowden, 2007; Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast, 2016).

5.5 Summary of the Chapter

Findings elicited from the data indicated that revealed that students of all abilities and aptitudes voiced their concerns about their ability to meet the standard, manage their time and to connect with the learning program in the classroom. Student perceptions predominantly centred on learner confidence including doubts about their ability to use time productively within the classroom and establish positive relationships with their teachers; a varied understanding of and ability to connect with the curriculum or learning program; ability to complete activities and cope with the amount of homework; and widespread concerns about meeting the year level standard. Certainly, these concerns were voiced by substantially more students than those potentially identified as academic underachievers by their teachers.

Chapter 6 presents the third data set, which focuses once again on the perspectives and practices of teachers when they identify adolescent academic underachievers and the strategies teachers use to support these students.

Chapter 6: Data Set 3-Identifying and Supporting Underachieving Students

> *A key belief is every child can learn. They learn in different ways and it is our job as teachers to unearth that particular strength and way of learning, but also, we, as educators, need to share that innate belief that every child is capable of learning* (Mary, Constantius College).

6.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter presents the qualitative findings collected from interviews with 12 school teachers from Northern Tasmania. Eleven teachers who participated in the interviews had recently been or were currently employed in regional Catholic Colleges with one teacher employed by a regional state secondary school. Eight of the 12 teachers at the time of interview taught predominantly students in Year 7 and 8. Interviews were conducted with all teachers, using an interview protocol as an instrument (see Appendix B). As detailed in Chapter 3, section 9, ethical permission and privacy agreement was obtained from the Human Research Ethical board prior to recruiting teachers for interview. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed in full after each interview. Data from all transcripts were de-identified and processed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006: Creswell, 2013) and case study methodology as described by Creswell (2013) and Yin (2006).

Table 6.1 contains a list of interview participants, including identifiers and pseudonyms, schools, curriculum areas of expertise and teaching years of experience for interview participants.

Table 6.1

Interview Participants: General Characteristics

DATA IDENTIFIER	TEACHER PSEUDONYM	SCHOOL	CURRICULUM AREA	YEAR LEVELS TAUGHT	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE
1	Carol	Fidelis	Humanities/Generalist	7-8	5-10
2	Donna	Constantius	Drama/Humanities	7-8	30-35
3	Tina	Constantius	English/Humanities	7-8	5-10
4	Erin	Constantius	Maths/Science	7-10	10-15
5	Cass	Constantius	Religious Ed/ICT/TESOL	7-12	10-15
6	Mary	Constantius	English/Religious Ed	7-8	25-30
7	Lucy	Caritas	Health/Physical Ed/ICT	7-8	15-20
8	Beth	Constantius	English/Humanities	7-8	15-20
9	Francis	Fidelis	Maths/Science	7-12	30-35
10	Joel	Fidelis	Maths/Science	7-8	5-10
11	Jan	Wade High	Art/Technologies	7-10	25-30
12	Terri	Constantius	LOTE/Humanities/TESOL	7-8	5-10

Note. ICT = Information and Communication Technologies. TESOL = Teaching English as a Second or Other Language. LOTE = Languages Other than English.

The presentation of data from the interviews comprises the complete set of qualitative results for Data Set 3.

6.1.1 Themes emerging from teacher interviews

As outlined previously and described in Chapter 3.9.6, interviews were transcribed and coded using inductive analysis techniques commonly used in qualitative analysis and case studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2005, 2013; Yin, 2006). Three major themes encapsulating the study research questions and design were established during the processing of data. These

themes, including associated codes, categories and supporting evidence, are discussed in sections 6.2 to 6.8.

Two themes *Teacher Perceptions* and *Teacher Perspectives* relate specifically to Research Question 1. The third theme *Teacher Practice* relates to Research Question 3. Findings have been reported using the three major themes and supporting codes and categories as a conceptual framework to organise results. Two tables were created to present the themes and their related categories and codes visually. Table 6.2 presents a simplified hierarchical table of the three themes and their relationship to the study's research questions. Tables 3.5 to 3.7 (included earlier in Chapter 3.9.7) present a more detailed schema, displaying the three themes, supporting categories, and samples of participant phrases which inform the presentation of findings in this chapter.

Table 6.2

Major themes emerging from teacher interviews for RQ1 and RQ3

THEMES	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS TEACHER PERSPECTIVES	RQ1 What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?
	TEACHER PRACTICE	RQ3 What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?

Findings presented in Chapter 6 address Research Questions 1 and 3. The chapter delineates teacher perceptions when identifying adolescent academic underachievers, explores teacher perspectives on this topic and identifies challenges and barriers to teacher practice. The chapter then outlines the preferred practices teachers use to support underachieving students. The chapter concludes with a summary. A full discussion and analysis of all three data sets occurs in Chapter 7: Perceptions, Perspectives and Practice.

6.2 Teacher Perceptions: Identifying Characteristics

Teachers identified academic underachievers as students who displayed limited participation in learning and a low work output, challenging behaviour and avoidance tactics, literacy and numeracy difficulties, and irregular attendance. Other factors included organisational difficulties and background concerns. Three teachers explicitly referenced the benchmark of meeting the standard within their initial definition and this phrase appeared as a consistent thread throughout the data obtained from the interviews. Teacher perceptions of typical academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8 also included students perceived as hovering on the borders or margins of achieving a passing or failing grade for the subject.

They're borderline. They are so borderline with their underachieving (Carol, Fidelis College).

Teachers described these students as not incapable but needing to put in a great deal of effort to attain passing grades for the year level. Overall, teacher

perceptions collected from interview data were like the findings presented from questionnaire data in Data Set 1. The main identifying traits teachers used to identify student academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8 are reported below.

6.2.1 Limited participation and low work output

Young adolescents identified as academic underachievers demonstrated limited participation in class activities and a low work output for assessment. Teachers discussed low levels of participation, demonstrating a lack of connection, understanding and engagement with the learning and difficulties with completion of assessment tasks. Carol provided a snapshot sample of this behaviour as it might appear within a classroom:

> *Oh, they might be trying to talk quietly to the person next to them, might be trying to focus on the board but certainly this student doesn't ask questions, doesn't try to clarify understanding, doesn't come to seek help when it is time to work and (when it is time to hand in assignments) doesn't have any* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Beth reported that such students:

> *Do not complete work without supervision and constant reminders of expectations*, or *quietly avoid work, go through the motions and don't own up to forgotten work, misunderstanding or lack of interest. They just quietly hope to be ignored and therefore do nothing* (Beth, Constantius College).

Other comments made by teachers described young adolescent academic underachievers as students who demonstrated a lack of preparation for

learning when they arrived to the lesson and who generally appeared disorganised or unready to participate:

> *Sometimes they don't even bring their books and when they do it is sort of rolled up like this* [indicates a book rolled up into a scroll and waves it about] (Erin, Constantius College).

Such students also appeared to lack belief in their capacity to learn, or were unwilling to take steps towards participating in activities or actions:

> *And I said to him 'Look. We have got to be looking at books. What do you want to look at?' So we went and looked where the car books are and I went and picked him up a car book and he looked at that. He wasn't going to get it for himself and I find that it is like that for a lot of the students. They won't ask for help* (Terri, Constantius College).

Teachers also discussed looking for indicators that students lacked understanding about what they needed to do to participate in the learning:

> *You would be looking for indicators that students are verbalising that they don't understand, or are unable to produce the work at that level or show some other signs of anxiety or perhaps school avoidance* (Mary, Constantius College).

Another teacher stated:

> *I look for an inconsistency between spoken and written responses. I look for tardiness in organisation and assignment submission* (Beth, Constantius College).

While lack of participation and a low work output could manifest itself in different ways for teachers, the presence of these factors allowed teachers to

identify students who were potential academic underachievers in their classrooms.

6.2.2 Challenging or avoidant classroom behaviours

Teachers described young adolescent academic underachievers as students who displayed challenging or avoidant classroom behaviours that often appeared to mask the underlying academic underachievement. Examples of this included the student who 'acted out' and the student who 'avoided' attention as described by Lucy:

> *Being stereotypical here, I think they fall into one of two categories. One category, they've learned to try strategies to hide it. They take work home and get help at home so you don't actually pick up on it. They have lots of strategies to try to hide and disguise the fact they are struggling with something. They copy off a friend or get help. So, that student you don't pick up as easy. The other extreme is where the student just doesn't do the work because they can't and you have a very disruptive student. They would prefer you to think that they are disinterested or the class clown* (Lucy, Caritas College).

These academic underachievers were regularly involved in off task behaviour and consistently displayed 'mild to moderate' challenging behaviour, which at times, masked their limited participation in classroom activities:

> *The student just sat back and enjoyed the fact that they didn't do any work at all and didn't enter the discussion. Feet up on a chair, totally unfazed* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Mild challenging behaviour from academic underachievers might include the following:

> *For some students, there are going to be general avoidance tactics. You know, there is going to be getting out of the seat, going to talk to other people, calling out, chatting to the person next to them* (Donna, Constantius College).

Teacher perceptions regarding the underachieving student who 'acted out', was that this student was usually a male student demonstrating consistent behavioural challenges in the classroom. As Mary pointed out this academic underachiever appeared to be:

> *A capable kid but he was always, I recall, getting into mischief. He didn't engage in his learning as much as he should have. He was always getting put out in the corridor* (Mary, Constantius College).

Tina described an example of a student academic underachiever who consistently demonstrated challenging behaviour in the class combined with a lack of work and participation:

> *He spent a lot of time arguing with students to the extent where there were lots of student complaints about feeling unsafe and a perception that there were different rules for him. He was also unable or unwilling to complete any work tasks. There seemed to be a well-established expectation that when things didn't go his way he would just up the ante until he was asked to leave* (Tina, Constantius College).

This teacher surmised that the challenging behaviour demonstrated by the student described served a clear purpose, which was to remove him from the

classroom so he could avoid participating in the lesson. As teachers indicated however, not all students identified as academic underachievers exhibited visibly challenging 'acting out' behaviour.

Teachers described other students, who used avoidant behavioural strategies to avoid participating in the learning and the lesson. These students managed to evade participation through 'under the radar' avoidance strategies and their behaviour might not be perceived as challenging in class. Teacher held perspectives that these adolescent academic underachievers were often highly dependent learners who needed support to connect with and participate in learning.

> *I think the way we need to connect is by giving them the capacity to become more independent in their learning, to drive their learning* (Mary, Constantius College).

Teacher comments indicated the students who avoided attention tended to be passive learners. One teacher compared the academic underachievers in her class to other students she had identified as dependent learners but who nevertheless sought out her assistance in the classroom:

> *They won't ask for help. And that is something I need to keep reminding myself about. They won't ask for help. I actually go over and help them. There are some students who will ask for help and they will keep asking for help. I walk around the classroom and look at what they have written and say "Yes that is okay". They are not sure how to begin so I just start them off and these students can do quite well* (Terri, Constantius College).

This teacher's comment highlights dependency the underachieving student develops, being reluctant to engage in activities without support. The comment also underpins the potential positive impact that can be made by the teacher who knows and values the student, evaluating where and when the individual student might need extra support and understanding to participate successfully in the learning program or class activity.

Findings from the interview data illustrated that teachers believed that challenging and avoidant behaviour indicating a reluctance to participate, or to engage in learning was a key characteristic of an academic underachiever.

6.2.3 Literacy and numeracy barriers or gaps

In addition to noting students with the consistent masking behavioural traits discussed above, low participation, and work output, teachers also noted literacy or numeracy barriers:

> *In this context, it means if they are not getting the Australian standard then there are a lot of students, especially in literacy, who are not achieving that* (Terri, Constantius College).

Terri also spoke of a dislike of reading that impacted on a young student's participation and engagement in an English class:

> *He doesn't like reading. He would much rather watch Youtube. Just for example I took him to the library. I said you can read anything you like…. He just went straight to the computer and looked up Youtube* (Terri, Constantius College).

Teachers commented on the connection between student ability and mild literacy and numeracy deficits that impacted on students identified as academic underachievers:

> *Most of the attention and focus would go on those students who are not able to keep up with the mainstream. They are struggling with literacy or numeracy* (Lucy, Caritas College).

Tina noted similar literacy deficits with an academic underachiever she taught noting:

> *There was a tension between what he could articulate and what he could write about.*

Unpacking the content of texts could prove to be a barrier for students:

> *There is a book we use with a list of sayings and I sat down with M and I worked with him. He couldn't do the matching exercise, because he didn't know what all these common sayings meant* (Terri, Constantius College).

Teachers explained that that while these academic underachievers presented with difficulties generally, literacy or numeracy concerns were often a common factor:

> *The students don't appear to have a lot of ability in many cases, but often there are some issues with their literacy and numeracy, although not to the extreme* (Erin, Constantius College).

Additionally, teachers noted that the low-level literacy deficits found in academic underachievers were not always easy to address within the classroom effectively:

> *They are the ones that complain the most about not getting enough of my time. I never sit down. I am just going from student to student and then some of them go 'but I just don't understand when you are explaining to me'… they are that borderline group and they are the group that are complaining they are not getting enough of my time* (Carol, Fidelis College).

In her discussion regarding the identification of such students, Lucy also highlighted the impact of literacy difficulties on the academic underachiever's general participation in classroom learning:

> *PAT data or NAPLAN highlights those students but I think that data like that should just be reinforcing what the teacher already knows. You should already, well and truly, have picked up those students in your class from your everyday engagement with them. How well they engage with the tasks you set them, the formative assessments you do with them*.

6.2.4 Irregular attendance

Regular patterns of absence from school also formed a consistent pattern noted by teachers when identifying academic underachievers. Absences might signal students avoiding classes, important assessment dates, disengagement with school or they could indicate other concerns stemming from the student's home environment. Teachers noticed that absences had the potential to influence ongoing engagement, participation and achievement in the future.

> *There is a big gap. There has just been too much stuff that has been missed or they have missed too many days off school and then they are still*

underachieving. I feel like they are still underachieving by the time they get to Grade 10 (Terri, Constantius College).

Joel described attendance as being a major factor impacting on a student he identified as an academic underachiever:

One of the biggest hurdles regarding the perspective of him being able to achieve is attendance. It is just very erratic!

Other teachers noted the disconnect in learning and gaps in knowledge caused by absences.

It is some gaps…things that they have missed because of absence (Lucy, Caritas College).

While consistent attendance at school could be perceived as something that might be beyond a teacher's scope of influence, as Lucy noted, academic underachievers also chose to avoid school or classes on days when assignment work was due or tests were imminent:

It can be one of the signs…the student who doesn't come in particularly on assessment dates. They know there is going to be an assessment task and that is the day they don't come, or they feel sick in that lesson.

Thus, infrequent attendance could both impact negatively on student achievement but also reinforce or set in motion further patterns of absence from school or specific classes.

6.3 Teacher Perspectives: Factors that Impact on Identification

Teacher perceptions and identification of young adolescent academic underachievers primarily centred on the indicators outlined in section 6.2.

However, teachers' perspectives allowed for and acknowledged broader and more nuanced contexts and back stories emerging when considering factors and characteristics of student underachievement in the Year 7 or 8 classroom.

6.3.1 Differences between academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8

To begin with, the teachers noted some differences between academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8. Year 7 was perceived as a significant time academically and emotionally for many students, due to the transition to secondary school, while Year 8 could be viewed as a year of consolidation. As Carol pointed out:

> *Year 7s and 8s I find quite different. There is more acceptance in Year 8. They understand how high school works. Year 7 there can be all that extra conflict that goes along with being new to a system. They don't understand why things are the way they are. They are still adjusting to routines*.

Teachers appeared to attribute key differences between underachieving students in Year 7 and 8 mainly down to familiarity with routines and social groups and concerns arising from Year 7 transition from primary to secondary school. Nonetheless, differences in presentation and behaviour between the year levels observed by teachers could influence their perspective. Thus, their identification of academic underachievers might vary somewhat for students presenting as academic underachievers in Year 7 compared to students in Year 8.

Teacher responses demonstrated their awareness of the impact of transitional challenges related to learning:

> *It is such a challenging time, of such transition, socially, emotionally, physically and academically* (Mary, Constantius College).

Challenges stemmed from the move from primary to secondary school, combined with the physiological challenges arising in young adolescence:

> *Year 7s are hard yakka! They have come from so many different feeder schools and the pecking order and they've got to work all of that out so it is a big thing for them to be able to operate cooperatively in a classroom for learning to take place* (Jan, Wade High School).

The development of conceptual understanding and readiness to learn in secondary school was also noted:

> *We did deliberately have the learning support team work a lot more with Year 7 teachers than with other teachers and that was good. Someone who came in new would wonder why students didn't know these concepts... They hadn't quite reached that cognitive stage, that developmental stage* (Francis, Fidelis College).

Another teacher noted differences between the two different year levels stating that:

> *In Year 7 students simply take a long time to get organised and rely on other people to tell them what to do. Some students do not complete work with supervision and constant reminders of expectations* (Beth, Constantius College).

The comments made by most teachers suggested that teachers acknowledged the transition to secondary school influenced the performance and

independence of many students and that there were differences in the way this was managed by students in Year 7 and 8.

> *One of the unique things about teaching grade 7 is that it is not the changing around in the classroom, it is the changing around in the pedagogy that they are used to in primary school, where there is much more of a student focus on learning where everyone is responsible* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Teacher comments also indicated that they believed Year 7 was the appropriate time for identifying and addressing patterns of academic underachievement, especially for academic underachieving students who were in danger of falling through the cracks:

> *Because there are some students, they just need that little bit of support for a little while, if it is because there are some gaps, or types of things that they have missed because of absence or similar in primary school, you can then get them back on the right track* (Lucy, Caritas College).

Other teachers noted that Year 8 students might be more challenging behaviourally to manage in the classroom or beyond:

> *We've identified that Year 8 is our weakest link here and that's where we start to get some behavioural issues* (Mary, Constantius College).

Not all teachers found this to be the case however: as one teacher commented*:*

> *If you are going to have an argument in the classroom it is most likely going to happen in grade 7* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Teacher comments varied in their emphasis and interpretation regarding the academic and behavioural differences between students in Year 7 and 8:

> *Some students in Year 8 quietly avoid work and go through the motions and don't own up to forgotten work, misunderstanding or lack of interest. They just quietly hope to be ignored and therefore do nothing* (Beth, Constantius College).

Beth's perspective above may indicate that by Year 8, some academic underachievers have decided to 'go under the radar' in the classroom and developed strategies to cope with learning challenges.

When teachers discussed differences, they emphasised specific academic transitional challenges facing Year 7 students and the growth in maturity between a student in Year 7 and one in Year 8.

> *I guess that is also the difference between a Grade 7 and a Grade 8 by the end of the year. A Grade 8 by the end of the year, you can sit down and have that more mature conversation and they can usually generally see that yes, they have improved and you have worked with them on their goals that year, whereas a Grade 7 in that same boat, doesn't generally see it so it can make them more frustrated* (Cass, Constantius College).

6.3.2 Background factors and contexts

Teachers also described students as often having complicated background factors that impacted on their participation at school.

> *A real eye opener for me this year, is an awareness of the significant factors that can play on children, external to the school.* (Joel, Fidelis College).

Teachers noted that difficult background circumstances could affect student achievement negatively in the classroom.

> *It may be that some significant thing is happening in that young person's life that is causing them not to be able to concentrate, it might not be anything to do with their academic ability* (Mary, Constantius College).

Teachers reflected on individual students wondering whether the lack of participation and engagement could stem from family background factors and a low priority placed on education:

> *I am just thinking of one boy who I have in Grade 8. One of the biggest hurdles, as in the school perspective of him achieving what I think he is capable of is his attendance. It is very erratic! What is his view of his education? Does he see it? I mean we are talking about a 13 or 14-year-old boy here. The last thing on his mind is his education* (Joel, Fidelis College).

Some student underachievers came from background circumstances of extreme disadvantage:

> *And I passed the concern on to the social worker and the Year 8 Coordinator but still-in this day and age- there are still kids like that in poverty cycles, yeah! And here we are expecting him to achieve. When he probably feels awful, has worn his clothes God knows how many days, and is going home to, well it is daylight savings now, but in the Winter months, that would have been hard at five o-clock! Going home to candle light* (Jan, Wade High School).

While most teachers did not describe or note background circumstances as extreme as those experienced by the student described above, findings

indicated teachers acknowledged that the background context of students were often an influential factor on academic achievement.

6.3.3 Meeting the standard

Teacher identifications of academic underachievers were similar in theme and content to the responses given by teachers to the questionnaire in Data Set 1. The students identified were the students that did not meet 'the standard'; a standard generally determined by Australian curriculum guidelines. Teachers identified these students as academic underachievers who were 'falling through the cracks'. This young adolescent underachiever often arrived at secondary school with limited or minimal background information, and no formal identification of a learning, literacy and numeracy barrier:

> *No, we didn't get any information about this student from the primary school, but there is an older sibling in the school so I actually did! I spoke to the pastoral coordinator and they said that the older siblings were quite often underachievers as well. I have no information on them but that they are behind. He can fall through the cracks not being somebody who comes and asks* (Carol, Fidelis College).

This teacher attempted to explain to the students in her Year 7 class the processes and politics of meeting or overtaking the standard:

> *I tried to avoid that, you know, the big clincher between a D and a C. And I said there is nothing, there is nothing on heaven and earth I could do that would get you all As. There is no possible way a teacher can get every single*

person in the class As. There's no magic word, there is no magic activity that a teacher- on their own- can do.

6.3.4 Problems and issues with identification

On occasion, at different points within interviews, teachers referred to two groups, often included within the broader definition of underachievement, who were not the primary focus in this study. These groups included students with diagnosed learning difficulties or barriers who did not meet the 'standard' set for age and stage but who demonstrated progress in their learning, and students, previously identified of high ability, who were meeting the standard. This second group attained passing grades but could be considered academic underachievers based on projected expectations ascertained from test scores.

I guess the most common definition is that their results aren't what you would probably consider as satisfactory. But I think you can have underachieving students that are quite gifted, that aren't achieving anywhere near their potential. They are just coasting along as an average student. However most of the attention and focus would go on those students who are not able to keep up with the mainstream that are struggling with literacy or numeracy (Lucy, Caritas College).

As indicated in Lucy's comment, identifying and addressing academic underachievement could be viewed as problematic for students, families and teachers, whatever the student's projected ability. Thus, teachers demonstrated their professional concern for students who were attaining passing grades on year level standards but not necessarily achieving estimated potential. Teachers

also often referred to students with diagnosed learning barriers, who were showing some achievement based on individual goals set in Individual Education Plans (IEPs) but who were struggling to attain passing grades:

> *I have a kid who has issues. He is not reaching standard but is he underachieving? No way! And I think, in speaking to his parents, he is achieving a lot but he is still not reaching standard* (Joel, Fidelis College).

However, themes elicited and developed from the data suggest that these students did not cause their teachers as much concern as the academic underachiever in their classroom who did not appear to have a diagnosed learning barrier or difficulty. Carol described her difficulties with addressing the needs of one young academic underachiever she taught:

> *I've got two specifically funded students. I have another student with quite a lot of diagnoses, who I have managed to bring to the attention of support personnel. I have a teacher aide, who I get to allocate around and sometimes she works with him but that's purely because it is my choice. She is there for the others. I am lucky, the others will quite often check in with me or I will call them to check in with me but no, he, because he is already entrenched with avoidance strategies, he won't give it a go unless you are there.*

Students identified as academic underachievers did not necessarily appear in classes with a diagnosed learning difficulty or IEP. The students perceived as 'falling through the cracks' and not meeting year level standard, emerged as the most characteristic or stereotypical academic underachiever for teachers:

I think it is hard to define a student as an underachiever. And it moves, yes, I guess the bar moves and they go above it or below it, but I do as such, have an idea that these are the kids that show understanding or demonstrate understanding, but on and off, based on how they have come to school that day or week. I guess I could put those kids more easily into the underachieving basket than I could the other kids who have learning difficulties (Joel, Fidelis College).

6.3.5 Formal identification procedures

Some teachers highlighted the need for some identification process for borderline academic underachievers.

I think so long as you don't say: 'oh that's just the stage they are going through' and miss something important. That needs to be looked at in Year 7. I think all Year 7 students should be tested, using your NAPLAN, your PAT (Reading and Numeracy tests). Things should be picked up (Francis, Fidelis College).

Identification processes recommended by teachers included tests such as NAPLAN and PAT (Progressive Achievement Testing), but, as Lucy noted, relying only on these tests was not enough:

I think it is important not to rush the decisions. We need to triangulate the data so that there isn't just a one-off thing that you are using, such as NAPLAN or a PAT or a literacy type screener. That you've got some formal sort of data as well as your observations and your formative assessments in

> *the classroom, that you are bringing the things together so that you are not making a rushed or rash decision*.

However, teachers found that even when using formal procedures, identifying academic underachievers could be difficult:

> *They don't give you enough! It isn't really even appropriate for me to make this sort of judgement, because they aren't showing you anything! They are not engaging and they are not taking you up on anything you might negotiate* (Erin, Constantius College).

Teachers also expressed frustrations with the limitations and scope of their professional expertise:

> *In an ideal world, underachievers would be catered for effectively! In other words, it wouldn't be such a guessing game regarding diagnosis and effective learning strategies* (Tina, Constantius College).

For the classroom teachers interviewed, the most reliable indicators and evidence of young adolescent academic underachievers in their classroom, were the characteristics and traits outlined earlier: low participation and output, challenging or avoidant behaviour, literacy and numeracy concerns and irregular attendance. Furthermore, teachers demonstrated more concern regarding students they identified as 'falling through the cracks' than they did for students in their classes with formally identified barriers, or those who might be not achieving potential yet still 'meeting the standard'.

6.4 Teacher Practice

Findings from interview data indicated that teachers held three broad perspectives that encapsulated their practice when working with and supporting academic underachievers in the classroom. Each perspective includes practical approaches and strategies as well as potential challenges and barriers. These have been included in their order of priority for teachers and are discussed in sections 6.5, 6.6 and 6.7. These perspectives are:

1. Valuing learning
2. Valuing the learner
3. Collaborating

Some teachers explicitly claimed that their preferred approach and philosophy was student-focussed, placing the student at the 'centre of the learning'. Teachers supported these claims with comments outlining their perspectives:

> *As teachers, it is our job to support the individual student to get where it is they want to go* (Cass, Constantius College).

For these teachers, teachers were:

> *In a unique position to influence how a child feels about themselves and how they interact with the world, working out how to influence not just skills but awareness (Donna, Constantius College)*.

Although several teachers claimed that their predominant teaching approach was student-focussed, data from interview transcripts indicated that most teachers appeared to use eclectic and adaptive practices to deliver the curriculum to their students. Furthermore, teachers did not give examples of

how they managed presenting the curriculum using a learner-centred model beyond adaptive measures such as basic modifications or adjustments to curriculum. Teachers understood their responsibilities for ensuring that their students had access to subject based content and knowledge that was age appropriate. Furthermore, these practices were usually prioritised over specific learning theories or middle years' models of practice.

> *I understand the difficulties that students have learning maths and science and I want to develop a conceptual understanding of what we are doing. I often find this hard to achieve and wonder how I am going to achieve it because there is this tension between teaching procedurally, teaching the formula, and trying to get a more investigative approach. I am still grappling with that I think* (Erin, Constantius College).

Given that the Tasmanian Catholic Education Office had advocated a preferred teaching approach that placed the student at the centre of all learning on its published learning platform (TCEO, 2012a), it might be expected that Catholic school teachers would claim a subscription to learner-centred approaches, at least overtly.

Student behaviour and engagement, the pressures of moving through the content of the curriculum and the need to balance these factors within the classroom, appeared to influence teachers' subscription to learner-centered approaches with their students. As Erin noted wryly:

> *Depending on how I am feeling on any given day, I think I should be 'student first, content second' and sometimes I sort of let that get to me. I think 'How*

dare they annoy me in my class!' But it is not about me, you know; you have to accept the complexity.

Other than the few teachers who indicated that they followed a learner-centred approach, most respondents did not claim to use a middle years' model when describing their practice.

6.4.1 Valuing learning

While some teachers acknowledged that learner-centered programs may well be a preferred model only a small number referenced constructivist or integrated curriculum. Findings from interviews suggested that the main tenet underpinning teacher practice was a high regard for learning. This love of learning was often informed by a personal passion for specific disciplines as well as the opportunities that learning provided. As one teacher remarked:

Oh, I always wanted to teach but I think when I started teaching it was more content based. I loved school myself. I did well at school…You know I was geared for content. And I guess when I started teaching that was what I wanted. I thought everybody had that feeling, that love of learning. What a shock! (Francis, Fidelis College).

A consistent professional satisfaction for teachers was observing the gains in confidence and understanding that students developed from their learning in the classroom:

What drives me as a teacher is the value that I place on what I do…because it is not about self-recognition or (self-recognition is not the word I am looking

for) looking for accolades. It is not a job about that. It is about developing, hopefully, a good future for the student (Joel, Fidelis College).

The focus on valuing learning reflected a strong belief held by some teachers regarding the potential of all students to learn. This perspective held similarities to aspects of growth and fixed mindset theory posited by prominent educator and psychologist, Carol Dweck (1999, 2006). Lucy outlined how this belief underpinned her practice:

My main belief is that all students can learn. That has got to be our focus. Taking students from where they are to where the best we can teach them. And not all students are going to learn at the same rate and not all students learn in the same way, so we need to accommodate that in our teaching.

Teachers also described the gradual transition in their perspectives on their practice, moving from a focus on content and subject towards one that prioritised understanding how students learn:

When I first went into teaching, I don't think I was a very good teacher because I was more interested in getting the content across and then I realised not everybody liked learning and not everyone could learn and that's when I started getting more interested in how students learn (Francis, Fidelis College).

Here the teacher discusses the main agenda, student learning. Feelings and beliefs connected with the challenges associated with teaching challenging academic underachievers also emerged as minor threads within teachers' comments:

> *Sometimes it's a selfish thing. Sometimes it's my own balloon ego on my shoulder. It is I don't want to feel this way! You know I want to be successful with this content delivered and you are interfering with that so I would rather you weren't here in my class* (Erin, Constantius College).

Some teachers also found the beliefs of some of their colleagues frustrating and limiting:

> *For me it is about recognising that they are learning. They are learning at their own pace. And the other thing I struggle with is when teachers say "you know they have reached their ceiling, we have taught this student everything they are going to learn." I don't believe that* (Lucy, Caritas College).

6.4.2 Connecting with learning

Teachers described the practices they used to address academic underachievement when working with young adolescents. These were practical strategies highlighting the need for improving the curriculum offered to the young adolescent, making it meaningful, engaging and relevant:

> *I think particularly with that group, we need to make our learning engaging and hands on and relevant to the real world so that they see there is some connection to what it is they are doing* (Lucy, Caritas College).

Relating learning presented in the classroom to the world of the young adolescent and using practical 'hands on' activities forms an essential part of middle years' practice (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016). However, most teachers in the study did not outline that they held perspectives or practices

based on specific learning models. Instead they described an eclectic mix of techniques and approaches used in their classrooms, including some practices similar to those advocated by middle years' practitioners. These mainly appeared to be adaptive techniques that appeared to be directed to enhance student connection to learning and the curriculum offered.

6.4.3 Engaging through curriculum

Some teachers believed that providing opportunities for underachieving students to connect to learning in the classroom might be more effective through integrated curriculum, if themes and understandings were broader.

> *It we did that differently and if curriculum was integrated with a broader focus, when kids come back would they connect in more quickly or easily* (Joel, Fidelis College).

Joel believed that the use of an integrated curriculum approach demonstrating flexibility and choice around the structure and topic could be useful especially when students had irregular attendance, a common trait observed in young academic underachievers:

> *It becomes hard to keep the student up to date about where we are. I start thinking then is it about how we structure our teaching around those units of work?*

The need for teachers to have a sound knowledge of curriculum and content for effective differentiation and adjustment was noted:

> *I think teachers are working hard and are doing the best that they can but when things keep changing, like the Australian Curriculum, I think teachers*

> *are working so hard to learn the curriculum. I'm talking to teachers from X and they taught Year 7 last year and the year before, they knew that curriculum and were starting to differentiate well because they knew it, they understood it, they knew what they wanted students to do* (Lucy, Caritas College).

Teachers used terms such as adjusting, modifying, differentiating, negotiating and integrating, to improve student connections to the curriculum. This was directed towards making the learning program more accessible for adolescent underachievers rather than a revision or critique of the program offered.

> *I am good at tailoring the class activities to individual needs, so I can do that in all my subjects: so, to be adaptable enough to that, well the aim is for the child to achieve success at some level* (Jan, Wade High School).

6.4.4 Pedagogical practices

Pedagogical strategies used by teachers were dominated by explicit instructional methods. These included the use of simplified instructions when presenting content or teaching skills; scaffolding tasks and breaking down tasks into smaller elements. Other strategies and tactics included providing feedback to build confidence; using peer groups and collaborative tasks to engage students, organisational assistance with task management and completion and ongoing monitoring of progress:

> *I spend time in class having quiet conversations. I don't single the students out but always look at their books and use the homework planner to communicate. I make sure that I adjust the lesson for each student and*

> *their weaknesses, and address individual needs in homework planning. If a teacher aide is available, I group according to need. I give all students choices in their assignment work* (Beth, Constantius College).

Using technology, including the use of personal devices for students such as iPads and tablets, as a tool to enhance learning and increase engagement was also mentioned. Teachers had mixed views on the effectiveness of technology and appeared to view the use as technology as one of a range of teaching tools or strategies that could be used within the teacher's repertoire:

> *Probably the biggest challenge with the disengaged underachiever is just the temptation to go into their programs and it's very easy for them to start engaging in instant messaging and to go off task* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Using technology as a tool that supported teachers in the management of their various tasks could also have some unforeseen side-effects on pedagogies:

> *I found when we introduced iPads, I was a bit concerned because teachers were doing some tests and marking them on the iPad. Which was fine, it saved time but how does the student know what they have done wrong. I was worried that teachers, some who might be feeling weak in an area were replacing the teaching with iPads* (Francis, Fidelis College).

Supporting the student to connect to learning in the classroom was strengthened when teachers created effective collaborative learning and peer support groups and incorporated these within their pedagogical practices. Teachers discussed creating collaborative learning groups in variety of ways, based on ability levels, common interests or groupings based on specific tasks.

As one participant noted, the success of such groupings could depend on the structure and the relationships between students:

> *I can think of one student who is an underachiever. Now he was very loud, very amiable and got on quite well with the kids but I knew that if I put him with certain students this behaviour was still the same (and I am not talking about the volume of his voice here). You reduce the behaviour but I don't think you would be asking your kid to be totally different* (Donna, Constantius College).

There was also the need to be mindful that students were concerned about the perceptions of both teachers and their peers, both when adjusting or differentiating tasks and working collaboratively with peers:

> *I'd be quite discrete in terms of what tasks I would give and so I might make sure that a task I might give the kid who was underachieving would be one that had some sort of leadership attached to it. I would maybe give them something that would play to their strengths* (Donna, Constantius College).

Teachers used techniques such as scaffolding and providing visual cues and instructions to make assessment and learning tasks more manageable for students:

> *I concentrated on negotiating 'baby steps' with him by breaking tasks down for him. Not dazzling him with the end product expectations and due dates but focussing on the order of first things first* (Tina, Constantius College).

Tina still noted limited success however with this specific academic underachiever remarking that despite the strategies implemented:

> *The reality was that he made a lot of promises but did not ever deliver on them.*

Tina's comment provides an example of the young adolescent academic underachiever's persistent avoidance and lack of engagement with the task, despite the supportive practices used by his teacher.

6.4.5 Knowing and valuing the learner

Data gathered suggested that teachers strongly valued and encouraged the development of a positive regard towards students as a strategy to enhance the student's connection to learning.

> *You've got to know your students because if you don't know your students and where they are at and where they can go and what is going on in their lives then you don't understand them and that has an impact on their learning* (Cass, Constantius College).

As can be seen in these comments, teachers noted the positive impacts on student learning outcomes when taking this approach.

> *I think the most important thing is that their teachers know them and value them. There is a saying that I like and that is 'you can't teach them till you reach them' so you really do have to know them* (Mary, Constantius College).

For academic underachievers who were described as struggling to connect to learning or participate in activities, the development of positive

relationships with their teachers could be viewed as a significant factor in future achievement. However, teachers pointed out that academic underachievers may need extra support to be able to both connect with their teachers and with the curriculum and some considered it necessary to make an extra effort. Teachers who know their students can then ascertain and more accurately address their learning needs in the classroom.

> *I think you do have to know your students individually. That can be very challenging in a high school environment because you have so many classes, so it is difficult to get to know all the students in your class* (Cass, Constantius College).

For many respondents, the significance of knowing and valuing the learner was not interchangeable with operating from a predominantly learner-centered models , nor did teachers appear to propose delivering individualised programs for all their students, or for all academic underachievers. Findings from the interview data indicated that most teachers prioritised the adaptation, adjustment and modification of tasks through differentiation of the curriculum to support academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8. Erin illustrated the need for compromising and balancing curriculum delivery with her students' need for a positive relationship with their teacher, saying:

> *You know I come in thinking well I am going to teach this. This is important. This is the content! And forgetting for a while… Because I remember one little boy said, "Aren't you going to play some 'get to know you' games with us?". I reflected on that later and thought perhaps that there was a little bit of something in this because here was me! I had content!*

For the teachers interviewed, knowing and valuing their students enabled and enhanced student learning and positive outcomes. Predominantly, teachers had eclectic and nuanced perspectives on their beliefs underpinning their teaching approach rather than specific learning or middle years' models of practice.

6.4.6 Developing relationships

Positive relationships that valued the learner were seminal to the development of learning in the classroom:

> *I find that students will disengage if they do not have a voice and if they feel no connection to their teacher* (Beth, Constantius College).

A consistent thread emerging throughout the data was the importance of developing productive relationships with underachieving students and their families. As noted earlier, teachers held perspectives that understanding and valuing students increased positive learning outcomes. Thus, building and developing relationships between teacher and student was highlighted as significant aspect of effective practice when working with students of all ages, providing a bridge or connection to the curriculum and classroom:

> *I see teaching as primarily a relational activity that must focus on developing trust and respect between the student, parents and teacher. Mastering the curriculum content and being prepared to continually evaluate my teaching practice by exploring pedagogy is equally important but useless, in my opinion without the desire to advocate for and empower our students as learners* (Tina, Constantius College).

Data from teachers interviewed indicates that teachers prioritised similar practices when they attempted to build and strengthen relationships with academic underachievers. Teachers worked on building trust, knowledge of their students as individuals with a range of interests and abilities. They hoped to provided encouragement to strengthen learner confidence through monitoring, praise, feedback and a positive environment:

> *You are just doing whatever you can to build up confidence and perhaps it also harks back to the classroom environment you set up. It has to be supportive with no putdowns (Donna, Constantius College).*

6.4.7 Feedback and monitoring

Teachers spoke of encouraging and pushing small achievements along the way with resistant students, and providing ongoing support through consistent monitoring of progress:

> *A couple of Grade 7 boys, very low ability, and just what I call COD "chronic oppositional disorder". No confidence. I have found that they are hard yakka, but you sit next to those kids all lesson and drill away at them, you know. I think you just need to move around. I would expect them to achieve a small amount each lesson and a skill base builds up once you give them the teeny-weeny snippet, the tiny bit* (Jan, Wade High School).

For Jan, proximity and persistence assisted, along with warmth and what she termed:

> *You know, bribery! But the lads I am thinking of have short fuses, they can 'go' like that, so it is all a matter of cajoling.*

Teachers believed that without a sound relationship or connection between teacher and student, academic underachievers were less likely to connect to the learning in the classroom, despite adaptation and modification of curriculum and the use of supportive pedagogical strategies. Building positive relationships could help support and strengthen a student's willingness to participate and engage in the classroom and the curriculum. As Donna noted:

> *I think that the other thing is that I place a tremendous importance on my relationship with kids and I will work on that. I will use my curriculum to build relationships*.

For this teacher, practice based on knowing and valuing the learner supported the development of student confidence and could promote learning in the classroom.

6.4.8 Collaborating

Collaboration also emerged as a significant practice for teachers when both identifying and teaching academic underachievers. Teachers highlighted the value of using team approaches to assist underachievers as well as collaboration with parents and guardians to support targeted learning goals:

> *Well …you would involve the year level coordinator and they would involve the other teachers. So, they will involve the English teacher, the Maths/Science teacher to see where they are going…. Probably involve the Special Needs, you know the support person, to see if they can do a screener. Probably involve the parents too, because sometimes the parents*

don't give all the information to schools so they can give the child a fresh start (Lucy, Caritas College).

Findings indicated that teachers advocated collaboration with parents, colleagues, administrators and learning support personnel as a supportive practice for both identifying potential learning difficulties, and addressing learning gaps with student underachievers.

While teachers referenced the need to collaborate with a range of personnel, teachers generally collaborated with teaching colleagues who either taught the student or taught the same subject and year level:

To a degree, there is a lot of collaboration within the teacher office if you have teachers teaching the same subject. Building up those relationships with teachers who teach the same subject... is probably key because then you have resources to share and it gives you more time in effect (Cass, Constantius College).

Predominantly, teachers appeared to turn to colleague teachers for emotional and specific support to help manage challenging behaviour, resources and support to assist with modifying and planning curriculum. As Erin noted:

I think all my close colleagues are supportive, whether it just be about having a conversation.

Support could also exist side by side with ambivalence about approaching faculty and pastoral coordinators and teacher aides. Erin qualified her feelings about receiving support from pastoral faculty coordinators stating:

I've always found that the support I have received has never undermined me but well, then the students probably do think, 'oh well so and so has

been doing the wrong thing so Mr So and So has taken the class because Mrs D couldn't handle it' (Erin, Constantius College).

There were also mixed views about the potential benefits from collaboration with teacher aides:

It is not that I found the teacher aides unhelpful, of course not, but I didn't find teacher aides to be particularly helpful in that sort of challenge (Erin, Constantius College).

Furthermore, teacher aides were often scheduled on classes to support students with special learning needs who attracted targeted funding from state and federal governments. As teachers noted on questionnaire data for the first data set, they could not always rely on a consistent teacher aide presence in classes to support academic underachievers.

Yeah a teaching assistant would be nice you know, especially with high school. I don't sit down in my planner and note every lesson they will be there. It's like 'oh okay, they're here, that's great, well could you help out with this'. But if you had them for a certain time, you could plan a lot better. You could help the students (Carol, Fidelis College).

Some teachers also held reservations about collaborating with learning support personnel regarding underachieving students in general. One teacher described his experiences when seeking support for an underachieving student who he had identified with suspected learning difficulties in numeracy:

There is a learning support team. I appreciate the fact that I probably don't have an understanding of what their role is. I am not sure that support falls

> *into it. It seems to be more about identifying. The other side, where we find out how to fully support that doesn't seem to happen* (Joel, Fidelis College).

Teachers highlighted collaboration between teachers and parents of underachieving students as a supportive strategy. They indicated a need for clear and unambiguous communications regarding student participation and work outputs but were less positive regarding potential benefits. In addition to clarity in communications, outlining general classroom and behavioural expectations were considered important components when collaborating with parents, but could also be a cause of tension:

> *She wanted assurances that he would pass and made it clear to me that she expected me to monitor him down to making sure I provided feedback on his daily progress as well as supervising what he kept in his locker and took home in his bag every night! Part of the problem was getting her to acknowledge that he needed be given some space to learn to manage these things himself* (Tina, Constantius College).

Teachers indicated other reasons for tensions in communications and relations between parents and teachers:

> *In some cases, parents are not very supportive of their child and do not want to accept that curriculum adjustments are necessary* (Beth, Constantius College).

Or as Joel commented:

> *But I also get a sense of frustration when having discussions with Mum about how you do work, and things like that. I spoke to her about*

assignments. You know, saying I want to assess him on this and then she just put it back on me saying, "Well make him do it!" I am like, "How?" You know, do I just wave my magic wand? Responses like that from parents beg me to question what value education plays on the outside, externally.

Overall, despite many of the challenges reported, most teachers saw the value in a collaborative team approach to assist the classroom teacher in assisting to identify factors impacting on underachievement, including specific learning gaps and strategies to help meet these needs:

Communication is vital with the family, with the carers, to touch base with them and talk about what strategies are working and what the young person is like at home… sharing the understanding…It may also be necessary that some testing takes place, probably calling in the learning support team, so it would be a team approach (Mary, Constantius College).

6.5 Barriers and Challenges to Effective Practice

When working with academic underachievers, teachers reported many concerns with personal and professional obligations that they were not always able to meet. They highlighted the need for both time and resources to develop curriculum or enrich their learning programs:

You know, to be able to meet the needs of all those students in the class when you have gifted students right through to, you know, and usually more than one student who is struggling. It can be a student with ADHD, it can be auditory processing, it can be just students who are struggling academically, who don't have a disorder. The demands on the teachers are

to be able to meet those needs all the time. I think that every teacher is doing the best that they can and wants the best for their class. It is often just the resources (Lucy, Caritas College).

Teachers believed these concerns and challenges were barriers to effective practice, potentially having a significant impact on their ability to effectively teach young adolescent academic underachievers or to consistently implement and manage many of the strategies and practices outlined:

What I liked about the American model was that it made it easier for the teacher to differentiate the curriculum because you had all your resources in your classroom, so if something is not working for someone then you could just pull something else out off the shelf (Cass, Constantius College).

However, from the perspectives of many of the teachers, time, resources and expectations were not commodities that were within their own locus of control. Teachers also expressed frustration with resources and programs imposed on students and teachers alike from well-meaning schools, systems and governments.

You can never ever take a package (educational program from government or similar). You know, "Here, take the package! It won't be any extra work for you", and tailor it for individual kids. It won't work. You might as well say "Here is a package yourself kids" (Jan, Wade High School).

6.5.1 Managing time

A consistent perspective articulated by teachers within the interviews was the pervasive impact of time, or lack of it, on many aspects of their professional responsibilities.

> *Time. There is never enough. The school is incredibly busy and I have too much to do* (Beth, Constantius College).

Or as Jan commented:

> *Time is the thing. There is so little and it is so precious. More and more we are not given the time to be professionals and to do the job we are supposed to be doing or should be doing*.

Time management could be related to a range of issues and challenges for teachers and expectations for supporting underachieving students within a classroom:

> *Sometimes you just brush them off and its horrible but I've already got in trouble for that one this year. I can't remember the words the parent used but her son was quite upset because I didn't give him adequate time* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Time not only impacted on the teaching but on the teachers' capacity to identify and address student underachievement or difficulties:

> *Because I have got 28 kids and dealing with 28 kids is hard. And then what do I do with students like J who just sits there quietly and it is hard to notice he is struggling. Or M and you think 'oh she could be a little dyslexic' she comes across as verbally very good but she misses a lot of things. I feel like I am not doing the best for those students. Like I am not helping them enough* (Terri, Constantius College).

Teachers held perspectives on how time could be used productively to assist in the identification and support of academic underachievers, describing

how academic underachievers might benefit from teachers being given specific time for team planning and collaboration.

> *I think that sort of thing should be picked up in Year 7. Again, that is why I am saying that perhaps Year 7 teachers need a lighter load, because we need to focus on that and turn it around. We focus on our 11s and 12s because it is outsourced. But in reality, the basis is in the 7s. A good teacher should pick that up in 7 and 8* (Francis, Fidelis College).

6.5.2 Managing expectations

Themes from findings also highlighted some of the emotional factors that teachers found to be an end-product of managing the competing expectations from the system, parents and students when teaching young adolescent academic underachievers. Teachers expressed their frustration about working within systems that promoted a learner-centered approach for students who struggled but did not provide adequate structures and supports for teachers to put this into practice. As one teacher stated:

> *It is so hard to do justice to the challenge of meeting all our students' needs. I think the danger can be that we overthink and take on too much responsibility for the success or otherwise of our students after we have put a 'good enough' effort in as class teachers* (Tina, Constantius College).

However, sometimes this frustration became a more personal expression of emotion that focussed on underachieving and disengaged students:

> *It can be frustrating but I just sort of accept it. I just do what I can. It is more frustrating when this is the tricky bit. The catch with differentiation*

is if you are going to the trouble of planning the activities for the weaker students, when they are not engaging. It can be frustrating because you have invested time in it and into putting an alternative, to doing something extra. That is frustrating (Carol, Fidelis College).

Thus, in addition to providing time for more effective practice and support in managing expectations around what teachers could implement, concerns also emerged about the need for schools and systems to prioritise supportive structures that provided teachers with support to teach the range of students presenting in their classes. The teachers believed that the provision of time and resources to enable them to adjust their programs was a significant priority for working with academic underachievers. They hoped to use this time to gain a better understanding of their student's learning needs, and to provide resources that would assist when addressing specific learning gaps:

I believe that now, in the last few years, all students are operating like businesses and I am talking Catholic and public schools here. There is that emphasis on 'bums on seats and business as usual', money coming in and all that, in the attempt to make sure that all boxes are ticked, in terms of how things are viewed by the community. I think we are in danger of losing some of the essential things that I think are important in a school in terms of a student's learning (Donna, Constantius College).

6.5.3 Barriers to building relationships with academic underachievers

Teachers highlighted the importance of knowing and valuing the learner to effectively support student learning. However, this could prove challenging with

adolescent academic underachievers. Several teachers noted that building positive relationships with underachieving students could be considered a barrier:

> *What other things prevent? I can't really think of anything, except the relationship between the student and myself, because sometimes with these difficulties comes that antagonistic form of relationship* (Erin, Constantius College).

Teachers emphasised the need for positive relationships between student and teacher in their interviews, yet comments and examples more often indicated or described the challenges in these relationships. Teacher perceptions were that the challenging or avoidant behaviour that identified an academic underachiever had a negative influence on the relationship between teacher and student.

> *I felt hurt by the two main culprits that wound everybody else up. They weren't listening to me. They weren't listening to their peers. They are very steadfast, negative, really negative students in general and looking at placing the blame. There is a lot of blame* (Carol, Fidelis College).

Furthermore, while challenging relationships could have a negative impact on the student and teacher, as Tina remarked it often impacted on other students and influence the class environment as well:

> *We need to be able to free ourselves up to meet the needs of all Students, and often when we have very challenging students we feel inadequate about not spending time with every class member*.

There was a potential for teachers to resent the amount of time required to support an underachieving student, especially if teachers held the perspective that the learning of other students might be impacted in a negative or detrimental way.

6.6 Summary of the Chapter

Findings for this data set were organised within a framework of three major themes that were connected to the three research questions. These were *Teacher Perceptions, Teacher Perspectives* and *Teacher Practice*. The themes encompassed teacher experiences, beliefs, and practices when identifying and supporting young adolescent academic underachievers.

Teacher Perceptions addressed how teachers identify academic underachievers. Teachers identified adolescent academic underachievers as students who presented with four general characteristics. Academic underachievers produced a minimal or limited work output, had difficulties with aspects of literacy and numeracy, presented with challenging or avoidant behaviours and often had an irregular pattern of attendance.

In addition to the primary identifying characteristics listed above, teacher believed that key factors impacted on their identification. Factors included differences between academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8 and the presence of complex background circumstances or difficulties.

Teachers in this study did not include students with diagnosed learning disabilities, who were achieving targeted learning goals on IEPs, as academic underachievers. Some teachers alluded to gifted and talented students passing

year level standards but not achieving high results as a potential academic underachiever. However, these students were not described in the interview data and examples listed by teachers. Additionally, the young adolescent academic underachiever was not the only student who presented with learning difficulties in the classroom. Nevertheless, the teachers' perspectives were that the complex background factors accompanying students identified as underachievers, behavioural concerns and their lack of participation and engagement presented significant challenges to teachers. Teachers also discussed a range of constraints and barriers that impacted on the identification of adolescent academic underachievers in the classroom. A strong and consistent thread from the teachers' perspectives were their concerns with 'meeting the standard'.

Following from this, the final theme *Teacher Practice* outlined the main practices teachers used to support young adolescent academic underachievers. These included valuing learning, connecting to and accessing the curriculum; valuing the learner, developing positive relationships; and working collaboratively with their colleagues. Teachers also discussed challenges to effective practice that arose when they were implementing strategies to address underachievement.

Findings from the qualitative interviews used in Data Set 3 presented a specific type of student who emerged as the primary young adolescent academic underachiever. This was a student who was not meeting the year level standard, who was not identified with specific learning disabilities and who did not qualify for formal adjustments for disability and funding support. Teachers

believed that these students were ones who were 'falling through the cracks' in the system. Findings from the data also indicated that teacher perceptions and perspectives regarding academic underachievers were intrinsically related to their practice when addressing underachievement in the classroom setting. While the themes included teacher frustrations with the parameters and structures that they operated within, findings also indicated potential ways forward that are addressed in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7 presents a discussion of results from the three different data sets presented in Chapter 4, 5 and 6. Each of the three major themes, Perspectives, Perceptions and Practice, discussed in Chapter 5, section 4 and in Chapter 6, sections 2-4, are linked directly to a specific research question. Each research question is addressed individually in the following chapter. Common findings, informed by codes, categories and descriptive statistical evidence are organised within this conceptual framework. Thus, the discussion arising from each question will consider teacher perceptions, teacher and student perspectives, along with teacher practice in relation to the research literature.

Chapter 7: Perceptions, Perspectives and Practice: Young Adolescent Academic Underachievers in Year 7 and 8.

> *I can think of no one who believes that having "standards" in teaching and teacher education is bad, who believes that educators shouldn't have high expectations for all their students, and for current or future teachers, or who believes that what we should teach and whether we are successful in teaching it, shouldn't be taken very seriously. Thus "standards" are good. But, basically this is a meaningless position. What counts as standards, who should decide them, where should they come from, what their purposes should be in practice, how they are to be used, what counts as meeting them-these are the real issues*
> (Apple, 2006, p xii).

7.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter discusses the findings collected from three sets of data gathered from three research questions which investigated the identification and support of young adolescent academic underachievers. Three overarching themes, perceptions, perspectives and practice, were used as a conceptual organiser to link findings gathered from the three data sets. The chapter organises and discusses the findings under the three major themes, which directly correlate to specific research questions, with findings grouped under the relevant theme and question. This organisational framework has been used to assist in clarifying the complex and many faceted data gathered from teachers

and students into a framework that presented teacher observations, beliefs and practice.

The study utilised a social constructionist paradigm and epistemology to explore the topic and thus offers an interpretive analysis of the findings. As Crotty (1998) noted when discussing interpretation from a social constructionist perspective "what constructionism drives home unambiguously is that there is no true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations to be sure" (p. 47).

Table 7.1 illustrates the themes and organisational structure of this chapter. The table, framework and discussion provides a practical and useful outline for interpreting the results presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Table 7.1

Organisational Overview of Research Questions and Discussion

THEME	RESEARCH QUESTION	CATEGORIES
PERCEPTIONS RQ1 TEACHERS	RQ1: What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting?	Limited participation and low work output Challenging and/avoidant and off task behaviour Literacy and/or numeracy deficits or barriers Irregular Attendance
PERSPECTIVES RQ1 & 2 TEACHERS & STUDENTS	RQ1: What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting? RQ2: What factors do young adolescents identify as significant to their learning?	Background factors Meeting the standard Connecting to Learning Barriers and challenges to participation Learner confidence
PRACTICE RQ3 TEACHERS	RQ3: What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom?	Valuing the learner Collaborating Connecting to learning through curriculum Connecting to learning through pedagogy Middle years' models of practice Barriers and challenges Managing time & meeting the standard

7.2 Addressing the Research Questions

Research Question 1 focuses predominantly on how teacher perceptions define the identification of young adolescent academic underachievers. Sections 7.3 to 7.3.4 address this question which asks: What characteristics and factors do teachers consider when they identify young adolescent academic underachievers in the school and classroom setting? These sections focus on the four primary characteristics used by teachers to identify adolescent academic underachievers in their classrooms.

Sections grouped under the theme of Perspectives (sections 7.4 to 7.4.5) include a component of Research Question 1: factors identified and considered by teachers when teaching academic underachievers. These sections also present findings resulting from Data Set 2, Research Question 2. This data set and research question addressed student perspectives regarding achievement, focusing on the challenges identified by students in Year 7. The data provided an alternative perspective on the topic, allowing young adolescents to voice their perspectives on challenges and barriers they identified as significant in their first year of secondary school. Sections 7.4 to 7.4.5 combine findings from both teachers and students, taken from comparing data from the two different questions and data sets.

Research Question 3 returns to the major focus of the study, inquiring: What practices do teachers use to address academic underachievement in the classroom? This question is discussed in sections 7.5 to7.5.6. The chapter concludes by summarising how teacher perceptions and perspectives influence

their practice when identifying and supporting young academic underachievers in the classroom.

7.3 RQ1 Perceptions: Identifying Adolescent Academic Underachievers

When identifying academic underachievers, teachers predominantly considered year or stage level curriculum standards to assist with the identification, and then observed characteristics that they believed indicated an academic underachiever in their classroom. While initially teacher observations appeared to be somewhat loosely constructed and mutable, as noted by Dunne and Gazeley (2008), findings from the data indicated that four primary characteristics consistently emerged from teacher descriptions and definitions of young adolescent academic underachievers.

As discussed in Chapter 6, sections 6.2.1 to 6.2.5, teachers identified students as academic underachievers when they observed the four behaviours or attributes presented in 7.2.2 to 7.2.4. These students did not participate or produce evidence of their learning or work. They often engaged in challenging behaviour in the classroom or alternatively they avoided interaction and the teachers' attention. Academic underachievers appeared to possess lower levels of literacy or numeracy skills than their peers and their overall attendance could be problematic with a pattern of absences either noted or developing. All four characteristics outlined could be considered to form a component of engagement as defined by Chadbourne and Pendergast (2010), Smyth and McInerney (2007) and Fredericks et al., (2004). While the term 'disengaged' was not a word typically used by teachers in the study, they did tend to describe

a specific set of behaviours noted in students identified as academic underachievers and common to descriptions of disengagement observed among students and schools. As reported in Chapter 2.10. Fredericks et al., (2004), Smyth and McInerney (2007), Slee (2014) and Thomas (2013) amongst others, have included within their multi-faceted constructs of engagement and disengagement, students who might be disruptive in the classroom, unwilling to complete activities and assignments and presenting with or developing a pattern of irregular attendance.

7.3.1 Limited participation and low work output

Year 7 and 8 students identified as academic underachievers by their teachers demonstrated low levels of participation in class activities. Teachers also observed that there was limited evidence of completed homework or class assignments for teachers to assess. Erin described students arriving to class unprepared with basic equipment such as pens and noted that if the students brought their workbooks, that these might be rolled up and poorly maintained (see section 6.2). Other teachers discussed challenging, cajoling and encouraging participation in adolescent academic underachievers with limited success. These characteristics and behaviours suggest that the academic underachievers teachers identified demonstrated lower levels of cognitive engagement with classroom learning activities as described in the model presented by Fredericks et al., (2004) and outlined in Chapter 2.10.

Teachers also commented on a lack of work completed for assessment or submitted as homework. This characteristic was also mentioned in conjunction

with a lack of parental support by some teachers in the study. Joel wondered, for example, whether parental influences impacted on student participation and engagement in schooling in the academic underachievers he identified (see section 6.4.8). Hill and Tyson (2009) discussed the connections between parental involvement, participation, homework completion and levels of achievement in their meta-analysis of successful strategies for achievement in middle school students. Their findings were that parental involvement in schooling through organisational support and extracurricular involvements had a positive impact on middle school students' engagement with overall schooling. There appeared to be less of a positive impact regarding parental involvement and student achievement related to classroom instruction and homework completion.

Other studies on parental involvement in homework completion have indicated mixed results on achievement levels for middle school students (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Redmond et al., (2016) show a small amount of variance between parental supervision of homework between Year 4 and Year 8 for most students. However, parents of students classed as 'marginalised' (for socio-economic, disability and/or cultural diversity reasons), rarely asked about or appeared to supervise homework (Redmond et al., 2016). Teachers in these studies also believed that academic underachievers might not receive adequate parental support regarding instruction or help with homework. However, the research was not conclusive as to whether this factor would, in fact, make a positive difference to those academic underachievers failing to participate in the classroom and not completing work for teachers to assess (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Teachers participating in this study demonstrated their concern for the identified students even as they described the challenges they faced in attempting to increase the participation of an academic underachiever. However, as found by Dunne and Gazeley (2008), Luke et al., (2003) and McMahon and Zyngier (2009) teachers identified characteristics which reinforced perceptions that difficulties with participation lay primarily within the student rather than with their program or practices.

7.3.2 Challenging or avoidant classroom behaviours

Young adolescent academic underachievers were students who often demonstrated challenging classroom behaviours or avoided attention. Teachers described two types of students. These were students who acted out in the classroom and students who went 'under the radar', by appearing to have strategies in place to both avoid participation in activities and to avoid drawing attention to themselves overall. Teacher comments described types of behaviour shown by students who were challenging to manage in the classroom. These might include behaviours shown by the student described by Carol in Chapter 6, section 2.2, sitting with his feet up, listening to and quietly appearing to enjoy a disrupted classroom discussion. Mary displayed her empathy for another academic underachiever who was frequently placed outside the classroom by his other teachers for talking or other interruptions (Chapter 6, section 2.2). Nevertheless, her description of this student was that he was indeed a 'rascal' and, she noted with wry humour, that sometimes she too was tempted to remove him from the classroom.

Challenging behaviours emerged as one of a cluster of common concerns in the literature on disengagement (Fredericks et al., 2004; Slee, 2014; Tadich et al., 2007) and middle schooling (Cummings & Cormack, 1996; Pendergast & Danby, 2011). Therefore, it is perhaps not so surprising that this behaviour has emerged in participant descriptions and comments as an identifying feature of an adolescent academic underachiever as well as featuring in the literature (Bempechat et al., 2011). Both types of behaviours, challenging and avoidant, suggest a low level of engagement in classroom learning activities, and behaviour denoted by disruption, disregard for rules and structures, which was another key component of the multifaceted model of engagement described by Fredericks et al., (2004) in Chapter 2.10-2.11. Behavioural challenges in students are difficult for teachers to overlook. As discussed by Slee (2014); however, challenging behaviour may not only be masking academic difficulties or a lack of engagement or connection to schooling, it may be covering emotional distress:

> The cause of emotional difficulty for some students may be situated outside of the school, school becoming a site for the expression of their emotionality. Other pupils find that the demands of schooling cause them distress and these they express in unacceptable ways from the perspective of the school (Slee, 2014, p. 448).

7.3.3 Literacy or numeracy barriers or gaps

A further characteristic mentioned by teachers was the presence of literacy and numeracy deficits or barriers. Furthermore, as confirmed in teacher comments, such as Erin's in Chapter 6, section 2.3, these barriers were often

minor; the student's skills were low but not to an extreme level. Thus, the student gave the appearance of being able to participate in learning activities set in the classroom and to have access to the classroom texts and subject learning program. Nevertheless, teacher perceptions were that the students were challenged by the level of participation required or standard set.

In recent decades, national and state governments have provided funding programs targeting different 'at risk' groups with a special focus on achieving improved literacy and numeracy outcomes (Bernard, 2006; Luke et al., 2003). However, the underachieving students in the participants' classrooms did not appear to have been eligible for support through specific targeted funding programs. As intimated by Carol (Chapter 6, section 2), these students were *borderline* students who did not qualify for extra support. Furthermore, the students alluded to in the study appeared to present with literacy and numeracy difficulties for reasons other than a specific learning disability or barrier. Attendance, parental level of education, language background, and quality of teaching in earlier years were factors that appeared to impact on students' acquisition of literacy and numeracy in their schooling (Luke et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the students' literacy and numeracy difficulties did not always fall within specific targeted funding or programs guidelines for eligibility. One teacher, Jan, was critical of government remedial programs that were designed to assist teachers address these milder deficits in the classroom noting that they were ineffectual and time-consuming (see section 6.5).

Teachers consistently noted the presence of literacy and numeracy barriers in academic underachievers and used these characteristics to identify

underachieving students. However, literacy and numeracy barriers were only one of a range of factors and characteristics, and were not the sole or only focus of teacher attention in questionnaires and interviews.

Terri, elaborating on her observations regarding literacy barriers, commented that despite her efforts and encouragement, many of her underachieving students did not appear to enjoy reading (see section 6.2.3). Terri provided examples of her attempts to engage her students by providing choices for texts and reading material related to personal interests, a strategy well supported in the literature for literacy acquisition for young adolescents (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Honan, 2007). Terri noted that this approach achieved only limited success with the young adolescent academic underachievers that she had identified.

Literacy and numeracy deficits were indicated by teachers as a consistent feature of students they identified as adolescent academic underachievers. As noted by Bernard (2006), students in the early years of schooling who demonstrate low levels of learning behaviours associated with achievement, such as persistence and organisational skills, also demonstrated a delay in reading skills (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006). Furthermore, literacy and numeracy deficits acted as a barrier to participation in the classroom, limited access to the curriculum and prevented many young adolescents from both connecting to the learning and meeting the standard. Many students participating in the survey for the second data set also commented on literacy and numeracy challenges and appeared to recognise and

worry about the impact of literacy and numeracy deficits on their access to the classroom learning program and with *meeting the standard*.

7.3.4 Irregular attendance

Irregular attendance was a further characteristic that teachers used as an indicator of an academic underachiever. Teachers participating in the study discussed students who might show patterns of irregular attendance from specific subjects or from school in general. As some teachers pointed out, this would include missing days when summative assessment tasks were due or tests were being held. As noted in in Chapter 2.13.3 and sections 7.2.1 of this chapter, Fredericks et al., (2004), Elsworth et al., (2004), Slee (2014), Smyth and McInerney (2007), Redmond et al., (2016) and Thomas (2013) amongst others, have commented on the link between student attendance rates and student engagement in schooling. The connections drawn between attendance and engagement are well supported in the literature (Redmond et al., 2016). While teachers viewed a pattern of irregular school and class attendance as an indicator or key characteristic of an adolescent academic underachiever, it also became a factor in continued or entrenched underachievement for the students involved by further weakening their capacity to participate in classroom activities or to connect to the curriculum. Literacy and numeracy gaps or minor deficits are also likely to increase through ongoing absenteeism. Students who miss school or subject lessons frequently, miss out on foundational aspects to their relative stage of learning and thus may not progress with their peers (Elsworth et al., 2004; Sprick et al., 2015).

Additionally, for teachers in the study, student absence often confirmed a lack of parental or family valuing of schooling or education in general. Teachers like Joel and Carol questioned the value parents placed on school and education when they observed parents appearing to overlook or condone school absences without challenging this behaviour or working with teachers to address it.

While teachers commented on patterns of absence developing, the student absences described by teachers of academic underachievers did not appear to be so pronounced as to require intervention at a school or system level. In this characteristic, as with others, students might, once again, be the *borderline* students described by Carol in 6.2, attending just enough school to avoid systemic intervention.

7.4 RQ 1 & 2 Perspectives: Factors Impacting on Identification

Sections 7.3.2 to 7.3.5 discussed teacher and student perspectives. These sections address a component of Research Question 1: the factors that teachers consider significant when identifying adolescent academic underachievers in the classroom. The sections also discuss student perspectives elicited to address Research Question 2, the factors that students consider significant in their learning.

7.4.1 Background factors

Findings from Data Sets 1 and 3 indicated that teachers were aware that students identified as academic underachievers may also have had complex background factors impacting on their ability to connect with learning, and influencing their behaviour and motivation. Background factors in the literature represent a range of experiences or phenomena that might affect the students.

Many of the background factors, if considered independently, could place students in the various groups outlined as 'at risk' by Luke et al., (2003) and Hayes et al., (2006) or as 'marginalised' (Redmond et al., 2016). Groups classed 'at risk' included Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders living in communities of generational poverty, students from backgrounds of low socio-economic status, low levels of literacy and numeracy (discussed earlier in section 7.2.5), students coming from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), (Luke et al., 2003; Hayes et al., 2006; Redmond et al., 2016) students who were often absent from school, or those who had other factors that impacted on their schooling (Hayes et al., 2006; Redmond et al., 2016). Low levels of well-being have also been linked to underachievement at school (Von Battenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013). Membership of an 'at risk' or 'marginalised' group, mental health or wellbeing concerns and low literacy and numeracy attainment describes a background factor that may contribute to academic underachievement, but these factors do not represent all the various factors or complexities that influence academic achievement for young adolescents.

The background factors that were highlighted by teacher participants in Chapter 6 included poverty, level of parental education, home support for organisation and homework completion, regular attendance at school, and level of ability. These findings are comparative to those of Dunne and Gazeley (2013) who, in their study on teachers working in the UK, commented that underachieving students identified by the teachers in their study came from backgrounds with lower levels of parental support for homework and organisation and engagement with schooling in general. Dunne and Gazeley

(2013) found that teacher identification of academic underachievers included more students from working class backgrounds, and that teachers generally ascribed lower levels of ability to these students.

Teachers participating in the study did not specifically refer to wellbeing issues related to mental health of parents or of students, nor did they include students from Indigenous or non-English speaking backgrounds or cultures in their descriptions of academic underachievers. These factors may not have featured widely in teacher experiences, given the regional and somewhat remote setting of the research site in Tasmania, or perhaps the teachers in the study did not give these factors much weight or consideration when identifying academic underachievers. Additionally, as discussed in sections 6.3.2, teachers tended to exclude students with diagnosed learning barriers from their identification of academic underachievers. The exclusion of students with diagnosed learning barriers from teacher's practical understanding of academic underachievement fits with the operational definition formulated by Reis and McCoach (2000), and discussed in Chapter 1, section 4.

After the initial identification of the primary characteristics were observed by classroom teachers (discussed in sections 7.2.2 to 7.2.5), individual descriptions provided by teachers described students presenting with differing attributes and background factors which varied among individuals. Teacher knowledge of the students in their classrooms might allow them to ascertain that a background difficulty or factor was impacting on a student's ability to achieve or meet standard, but the range of circumstances affecting students and locating resources to assist with these were too broad and diffuse for most of

the teachers participating in the study to be able to use in any immediate practical sense. Teachers indicated in their comments that they expected that these supports and resources be implemented by support teams outside of the classroom and they commented on the limited time classroom teachers had at their disposal. Some teachers, like Jan, were highly critical of the types of programs given to classroom teachers to implement when supporting these students.

Actual descriptions of individual academic underachievers described in by participants in the interviews tended to be male, although this was not described, or elaborated upon by participants. Nor was it implied as an explicit characteristic by the teachers in their interviews or the data obtained from questionnaires. Furthermore, student comments elicited in the de-identified findings from the second data set did not appear to be 'gender' specific. Thus, this finding was not initially considered to be part of the study topic and the scope of the study does not allow room for further elaboration on this subject. Nevertheless, while the study has not included a specific focus on gender, it can be noted that the academic underachievers discussed by teachers were more often male students than female. Battenburn-Eddes and Jolles (2013) reported a similar trend in their recent study of 510 underachieving young adolescents in Amsterdam.

7.4.2 Meeting the standard

Throughout the findings in the three different data sets, 'meeting the standard' appeared to be a key benchmark used by teachers to measure student

progress. The benchmark measures student attainment and performance using Australian curriculum assessment standards. In its 2012 document *Principles of Assessment and Reporting*, the Tasmanian Catholic Education system stated that "assessment is continuous and is informed by defined standards" (*TCEO*, 2017, p.2). Both state and Catholic education systems introduced reporting based on Australian curriculum standards in 2012 (Assessment and Reporting Procedures, 2015; TCEO, 2017). Using a 'C' grade, assessed against Australian curriculum achievement standards for subjects studied in secondary school, was widely regarded as meeting the standard (DEEWR, 2012). Using this criterion, students regularly achieving D or E results potentially would be regarded as academic underachievers within Tasmanian secondary schools in the state and Catholic sector.

'Meeting the standard' formed a criterion for teacher identification of academic underachievers . It can be reasonably argued that teachers need some effective benchmarks to guide their assessment and reporting of student performance. Yet, as noted by Apple (2006), the standard is nevertheless, still a benchmark created within a political and social context which, unless subject to critical review, can assume an authority beyond its original intention. For the teachers involved in this study, young adolescent academic underachievers were Year 7 and 8 students not meeting standards using Australian Curriculum guidelines (ACARA, 2015). Academic underachievers included students achieving below benchmarks in standardised assessments of literacy and numeracy such as NAPLAN or PAT. However, students who might demonstrate high academic potential on assessments such as NAPLAN, who were meeting

standard but who were not achieving 'C' grade or above, did not appear to be identified as 'academic underachievers'.

Teachers identified academic underachievers as students who were not meeting standard benchmarks, provided these students had no formally diagnosed disability, learning barrier or other challenge, that might legitimately be seen to impact on their achievement levels. Students who were diagnosed with disabilities or other learning barriers, were expected to meet adjusted benchmarks or goals identified in PLPs or IEPs in line with the direction given by the Tasmanian Education Department (ACARA, 2015). A student with a disability, who exhibited the four characteristics, but who did not meet learning goals or an adjustment outlined in a personal learning or independent education plan, was included within their informal model for identifying an academic underachiever.

These variations appear to support the mandate outlined within the Assessment and Reporting Procedures instituted by the Tasmanian Department of Education. This procedural document, informed by the Assessment and Reporting Policy (ACARA, 2015) includes special assessment provisions for students with disabilities or on the Special Needs Register and deemed eligible for Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) and Independent Education Plans (IEPs), as well as students from LBOTE backgrounds. These students are assessed against goals outlined on PLP or IEPs. Within this policy and procedure, teachers have been granted the discretion to assess some students on a lower year level of the Australian curriculum, provided the student demonstrates that their performance is more adequately described by

performance standards in that year level and that parents have agreed to the adjustment (ACARA, 2015).

Identification of academic underachievers as students who were not eligible for special provisions or adjustments who were not meeting the age or stage standard, was particularly evident in comments and themes from interviews in Chapter 6. As noted, in keeping with the definition by Reis and McCoach (2000) teachers did not include students of high ability, identified as gifted and talented, who might be meeting the standard, but not achieving potential in their identified descriptions of typical academic underachievers. While a small number of comments indicated that teachers believed this group might also show signs of academic underachievement, the primary goal of meeting the year level standard, through a 'C' grade (or above) appeared to be viewed as a benchmark criterion to identify academic underachievers by most of the teachers participating in the study. Furthermore, teachers appeared to use the adjusted benchmark in their identification of students meeting adjusted goals outlined by IEP and PLPs and did not reference these as typical academic underachievers in their identifications.

As was apparent in the second data set, the cohort of Year 7 students surveyed also appeared to have a strong concern regarding their potential for 'meeting the standard'. These concerns became evident in their responses to the survey instrument, where responses highlighted significant concerns that they would not meet the 'level' or standard benchmarks. Based on the findings from data emerging from teacher interviews, and the comments from students participating in the survey, assessing students against the standard seemed particularly

significant in Year 7. The strength of this subtheme ran across all three data sets, and the absence of accompanying critical commentary or modifiers from teacher participants, indicated that there were underpinning beliefs and meanings attributed to 'meeting the standard'.

7.4.3 Connecting to learning

Codes and categories developed from findings indicated that connecting to learning was a prevalent category that arose in all three data sets. Teacher perspectives obtained from questionnaire and interview findings, indicated that a lack of engagement and participation in class learning was a characteristic used by teachers to identify an academic underachiever in Year 7 and 8. This characteristic has been supported by the research and discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.2 (Krause & Krause, 1981; McCall et al., 1992; Tadich et al., 2007). Data from teacher questionnaires and interviews implied that students whom teachers had identified as academic underachievers found it particularly difficult to engage with learning, participate in activities and complete and submit work for assessment. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 6, sections 6.2.2 to 6.2.4, teachers noted that academic underachievers who were not meeting standard also exhibited challenging or avoidant behaviour, and literacy and numeracy concerns. The presence of these behaviours indicated further barriers with connecting to learning in the classroom.

Connecting to learning also appeared as a common thread in findings emerging from the reflection sheet completed by the Year 7 students in the second data set. Comments indicated that students consistently found it difficult

to connect with or understand the learning presented in the classroom. Students appeared to attribute this lack of connection to personal difficulties in focusing, concentrating and understanding. They made comments indicating concerns such as *staying focused and being 100 percent concentrated* and requests for teachers to unpack and explain the content (see section 5.2.2). The students hoped to retain an interest in the material presented, or to have better relationships with teachers so that they understood what was happening in class. Students also indicated a wish for greater confidence in their ability to participate by asking questions and knowing what it was they had to do in class and with homework and assessment tasks. Three specific categories of 'focus and concentration', 'ability and understanding of learning program' and 'engagement and on task behaviour' recorded by students were considered from a holistic perspective, with data interpreted inductively (Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2013) and codes and categories aggregated into the broader 'thread' of a lack of connection to learning. Data discussed in Chapter 5.3.-5.3.2 confirmed that at least 56 students out of the 178 students surveyed had indicated difficulties with maintaining a connection to the learning program as it was delivered in the classroom.

Beane (2015), Dowden (2007), Evangelou et al., (2008), Luke et al., (2003), Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard (2006), Elsworth et al., (2004), and Pendergast (2010) among others, have highlighted the significance of connection to learning for young adolescents, students transitioning to secondary school, students who might be considered as 'at risk' and students with literacy and numeracy difficulties and barriers. The seminal report *Beyond*

the Middle (Luke et al., 2003), when examining the needs of students identified as various members of 'at risk' groups, posited labelling the 'middle years' as an area 'at risk' and outlined inflexible and unresponsive educational structures as being a potential factor. These findings are reflected in the body of research arising from middle years' researchers and educators who highlight the intrinsic link between providing appropriate, age relevant and meaningful curricula and pedagogies, and its relation to student achievement, engagement and participation in schooling among young adolescents (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2010; Pendergast, 2016).

Luke et al.,'s (2003) report also indicated that, at the time, at least one fifth of the entire student population in Australia, were affected by poverty or some form of regionalised marginal status and thus qualified as an 'at risk' group. Reporting similar statistics regarding poverty, Smyth and McInerney (2014) wrote that at least 570 000 children in Australia in 2012 were living below the poverty line. These students would be considered as those students presenting with 'background factors' discussed in section 7.3.3 previously. Data from student surveys, discussed in Chapter 5, section 5.3.1 and 5.3.2, have indicated that many of the Year 7 student participants, including students who would be regarded as meeting the standard, indicated some barrier to connecting to classroom learning.

Research and evidence, supported by educational policy and programs (TCEO, 2015) and backed by teacher professional judgement and experience, have highlighted the importance of connecting to learning for all students, but especially those who are 'at risk' or identified as academic underachievers by

their teachers. Furthermore, the data obtained from the Year 7 cohort from Constantius College indicated that connecting to learning was a challenge for around a third of the students from the cohort. It could be argued that managing the academic transition to school accounted for the general concerns with learning, engagement, understanding and curriculum raised within the students surveyed. Admittedly, researchers have highlighted a widespread slump in achievement levels for Year 7 students for some time (Benner, 2011, Evangelou et al., 2008;Tadich et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2010). Nevertheless, whether caused by, correlating with or influenced by transitional challenges, specific teaching practices or other influencing background factors, a significant number of students indicated a difficulty in connecting to learning in the classroom. Furthermore, these students were not necessarily only those who might be identified as academic underachievers by teachers. This finding represented a strong thread or category occurring across all three data sets. The teachers who participated in the study, posited that this was a significant concern for academic underachievers, a finding widely supported by the broader research (Attard, 2011; Hayes et al., 2006; Luke et al., 2003; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Wentzel, 1997).

7.4.4 Barriers and challenges to participation

Teachers held a range of perspectives on barriers and challenges to participation. Students identified as academic underachievers did not always qualify for targeted literacy or numeracy programs, nor did they always engage cooperatively in specific programs even if they did meet criteria for extra

support or resources. These students possessed varying needs for support, based on individual needs, which were complex and specific to their individual circumstances and context (Sullivan et al., 2009). Students also displayed different levels and capabilities in their learning behaviours and aptitudes (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). Students identified as academic underachievers also possessed limiting but quite different sets of implicit beliefs on their innate ability to learn, low levels of confidence, (Bernard, 2006; Carr et al., 1991; Dweck, 1999; 2006; Romero et al.,2014), motivational challenges (Bempechat et al., 2011) and background factors or deficits to be addressed.

The young adolescent underachievers in the study may have qualified for membership in different 'at risk' or marginalised groups. These groups present with substantially different challenges such as specific and individual concerns regarding literacy and numeracy abilities, and/or differing levels of attainment. Furthermore, the literacy and numeracy difficulties were not always obvious, leading to a general conclusion by many of teachers that the student could meet standard if they 'worked harder'.

The academic underachievers identified by the teachers were a different group to those students called low achievers by Gorard and Smith (2004). Gorard and Smith argued that many 'underachievers' were actually students from backgrounds of disadvantage or 'at risk' groups, who may not have met the standard, or if they did, struggled to do so. The authors argued that these 'underachieving' students might be achieving relatively well given their backgrounds and contexts. For the teachers participating in this study however, academic underachievers identified in Year 7 and 8 were clearly not achieving

their potential using the primary characteristics the teachers used to identify such students (discussed previously in sections 7.2.2 to 7.2.5).

Programs for students belonging to marginalised or 'at risk' groups, to improve attendance, engagement, or literacy and numeracy, did not appear to provide much support for the teacher working in the classroom setting, or for the underachieving student. Academic underachievers were quite accurately, if somewhat anecdotally, described by teachers as those students who were *falling through the cracks*. However, while teachers considered that these students were falling through cracks in the system, the lack of learner confidence, limited access to the curriculum and connection to classroom learning indicates that these students were also falling through the cracks regarding their learning in the classroom. Beane (2015), Dowden (2007), Pendergast (2010) and Tomlinson et al. (2003) have criticised the 'one size fits all' standardised approach to curriculum delivery provided for many young adolescents. Tomlinson's (2003) meta-analysis posited that most high school classrooms were populated by students representing a range of ability levels, age variations, background experiences and levels of motivation. For these students, the delivery of a standardised and relatively undifferentiated learning program resulted in poorer outcomes and lower levels of motivations for many students (Tomlinson et al., 2003).

On all three tiers of schooling, classroom, school and system, findings in this study indicated that young adolescent academic underachievers were not connecting, not participating and not meeting the set standard or benchmark for achievement.

7.4.5 Learner confidence

Teachers perceived that academic underachievers lacked confidence and skills of self-regulation, or the ability to organise and manage processes and strategies around their performance to improve their learning (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006; Hayes et al., 2006). The themes of low confidence and participation levels, noted in academic underachievers by teachers earlier, held similarities to the student perspectives identified in Data Set 2 (Chapter 5.3.2). Confidence, self-belief and self-regulation (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Romero et al., 2014), emerged as a thread in the comments from by students in the second data set. Students indicated that they did not feel confident about asking clarifying questions, managing their resources, which included completing tasks in time allotted, and managing homework tasks. The students often struggled to understand and connect with the curriculum in the classroom. These learning behaviours were included in the list of strategies denoting cognitive engagement outlined by Fredericks et al., (2004) and were also present in Bernard's model (2006). Students also found working independently to be challenging at times. Students completing the survey widely believed that they needed to improve in these areas and these were matters they were responsible for, findings supported by Bernard's study (2006). However, findings in the data suggested students needed further support to address these challenges. The students' conceptualisation of improving concentration, for example, included beliefs that if they concentrated more and could focus more effectively, they would connect with learning and

curriculum and achieve better outcomes. Students understood what behaviours needed to occur to facilitate their learning even as they acknowledged that staying engaged and on task was a challenge.

Bernard (2006) discussed the significance of learning behaviours for improving academic outcomes for all students, including students at risk of underachievement or academic failure. It may well be true that when students persist in their attempts to improve focus and concentration in class, results show an improvement in both study skills and overall educational outcomes (Fredericks et al., 2004; Tadich et al., 2007). However, the difficulties students outlined in connecting with learning and curriculum in class may not have only been due to lack of focus. Students may find the curriculum and learning program presented in the class difficult to connect with for a range of reasons.

Research has shown that students who are presented with tasks that are engaging, appear relevant to their age and life context, and are appropriately challenging learn more effectively and achieve better outcomes (Carr et al., 1991; Dowden, 2007; 2012a; Dweck, 2006; Hayes et al., 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Young adolescents in Year 7 and 8, including those identified as academic underachievers, benefit from curriculum and pedagogy that connects the classroom learning to the student's interests, community and world beyond (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016), and challenges and stimulates them appropriately and effectively (Dowden, 2007; 2012a; Hattie, 2012; Hayes et al., 2006; Jacobs, 2010; Pendergast et al., 2005). Therefore, it may be a reasonable assumption to note that it is easier for young adolescents to maintain focus and concentration on tasks and curriculum that they perceive to

be interesting and meaningful, relevant both to their age and cultural and social needs, through either task and program design (Dowden, 2007; Jacobs, 2010) or the use of effective pedagogical strategies that target the students' learning needs (Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Skilling, 2014). Additionally, as discussed by Tomlinson, et al., (2003) and others, further supports and strategies may need to be embedded within teacher practice to assist students who are academic underachievers to benefit from the learning program presented in class (Attard, 2011; Skilling, 2014).

The significance of self-belief to effective learning has been an educational concern for some time. Carr et al., (1991) amongst others, pointed out that negative attributions about ability to learn often resulted in a poorer performance. Dweck (1999, 2006) outlined that student negative self-beliefs, or 'fixed mindsets' had a direct impact on how students learn as well as influencing students' goal setting. Low self-belief or confidence becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and can result in lower achievement for students, including academic underachievers (Dweck, 1999, 2006; Tomlinson et al., 2003). These findings are also supported by the research from Dunne and Gazeley (2013) and Slee (2014) whose studies support the finding that teachers often locate the cause of underachievement as a fixed characteristic or trait of the student based on their construction of the student's social class and background.

This study did not set out to measure student negative self-belief in any of the three sets of data sets collected. Findings from the second data set which gathered information on student concerns, nevertheless, indicated themes of learner confidence as a recurring theme in the data. The presence of negative

self-beliefs within underachieving students who completed the reflection task remains a matter of supposition. Nevertheless, negative beliefs and attributions, in one form or another, have been included as part of the psychosocial, emotional and motivational constructs of underachieving students for at least three decades by McCall (1994), Griffin (1988) and Krause and Krause (1981). Furthermore, findings from studies analysed in the meta-analysis by Tomlinson et al., (2003) concluded decisively that student levels of confidence and motivation were lowered when academic underachievers were provided with undifferentiated standardised learning programs which presented content they did not understand and could not access. It might reasonably be concluded that many of the adolescent academic underachievers who were taught by teachers in the study, or who completed the reflection task for the second data set, held negative beliefs about their ability to learn and to 'meet the standard'; and that these beliefs would be reinforced when they could not connect to the learning or curriculum presented in the classroom.

Furthermore, findings from both student reflection sheets and teacher interview data highlighted the likelihood of young adolescent academic underachievers facing difficulties in establishing productive and positive relationships with teachers (Shanks & Dowden 2013; Wentzel, 1997). Combined with a lack of access to the curriculum, related to literacy and numeracy difficulties and possible complicating background factors (Luke et al., 2003), the barriers facing the young adolescent academic underachiever could be considered a significant impediment to achieving positive learning outcomes, or indeed with meeting the standard.

7.5 RQ3 Practice: Supporting Academic Underachievers

Teachers spoke of a range of strategies, endorsed by the research, that were used to support students who were academic underachievers in the classroom. Strategies included strengthening relationships (Attard, 2011; Shanks & Dowden, 2013; Wentzel,1997) modifying or differentiating, improving and negotiating curriculum (Hunter & Forrest, 2010), and adjusting pedagogies (Hayes et al., 2006; Pendergast et al., 2005; Raphael et al., 2008, Skilling, 2014) to allow underachieving students to engage in learning activities in the classroom. Other strategies included use of positive feedback, support with organisation, and ongoing monitoring and encouragement of student learning behaviours and work. Teachers also discussed collaboration with colleagues and support personnel (Main, 2010) and communications with parents to enlist support from home and family (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Common findings on supportive practices were apparent in the threads and categories emerging from all three data sets but there were also significant differences between the perspectives of student and teacher. An example of this can be found in the different ways teachers and student conceptualised relationships or, as teachers had commented, *valuing the learner*.

7.5.1 Valuing the learner

Productive and warm relationships between teachers and students have been posited as a significant practice to creating positive learning outcomes and enhancing academic attainment for students in the middle years for a range of

reasons (Attard, 2008; Dowden, 2012a; Pendergast, et al., 2005; Raphael et al., 2008; Wentzel, 1997).

Wentzel (1997) stated that positive relationships with teachers can be connected to learner self-confidence and independence (1997). In her study on teacher influences on motivation in Year 8 students, the author noted that students' motivation increased when they perceived that teachers cared about them (1997). Studies by Dowden (2012), Pendergast et al., (2005) and Raphael et al., (2008) confirmed that student, teacher relationships are a significant factor influencing student attainment and connection to schooling as "good relationships with young adolescents are essential in the middle years" (Dowden, 2012b, p 9).

Effective relationships between teachers and students can be characterised as warm, caring, democratic in style, creating a sense of belonging in class (Attard, 2011; Wentzel, 1997). This thread which highlighted the importance of building positive and productive relationships between a student and the teacher was strongly supported by findings in all three data sets. Teachers also held the perspective that improving relationships, adapting, changing or improving curriculum, including making it more 'creative' and relevant for students and linking it to student interests and abilities were preferred practices to support academic underachievers. These findings are supported by the well-established body of research noting the positive effect from using these strategies to assist all young adolescents to connect with learning (Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Hayes et al., 2006; Pendergast, et al., 2005; Raphael et al., 2008). Student data from Data Set 2 clearly indicated that

students recognised the value of a positive relationship with their teacher. Students articulated their concerns about their learning and achievement in classes where they did not believe their teacher cared for, or liked them (see sections 5.3.1 to 5.3.4).

Teachers from both state and Catholic secondary schools alike appeared to prioritise building positive relationships with their students. The findings indicated that this was a practice that teachers believed could help support those students identified as academic underachievers through increasing a sense of connection and learner confidence. However, as noted by Hayes et al., (2006) connection to learning can also be enhanced by supportive classroom structures, which foster student engagement with tasks and encourage deeper learning to occur. As was clear in Data Set 1 and 3, teachers noted that developing positive relationships with students they had identified as academic underachievers could be regarded as a challenge or barrier. The findings indicated that teachers identified academic underachievers as students with challenging behaviour, a lack of participation and engagement in learning and, at times, infrequent attendance. Thus, teacher perspectives were that challenging and avoidant behaviour and absence from class could have a detrimental effect on teachers' ability to develop an effective relationship with academic underachievers. These specific findings, identified by teachers as a challenge when working with academic underachievers, may also reflect the claim by Shanks and Dowden (2013) that diminished and negative relationships generally increase between students and teachers in Years 7 to 10.

Valuing the learner included practices such as building trust, knowing the student as an individual and providing appropriate support to develop confidence and connection to learning. These were cited by teachers as important practices that assisted in the development of positive relationships when working with adolescent academic underachievers.

Knowledge of individual students needs and providing flexible and personalised learning programs and curriculum have been confirmed as powerful practices to increase student motivation and connection to learning with young adolescents (Hayes et al., 2006). Teachers commented that building a good relationship often took time, persistence and proximity, with the provision of small incremental individualised instructions to keep reluctant students on task. These comments support findings by Wentzel (1997), Attard (2011) and Pendergast and Danby (2011) who noted that students believe caring is shown not only by 'teacher warmth' but also by individualising tasks and curriculum and providing constructive feedback to enable students to achieve (1997).

7.5.2 Collaborating

Teacher collaboration for effective learning was a key principle underpinning the learning direction promoted by the Tasmanian Catholic Education (TCEO, 2012b), and within the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017). Not altogether surprisingly, teacher collaboration was not a thread emerging from student responses in the second data set. Within the data emerging from

teacher questionnaires and interviews however, there were differences in the type of collaboration teachers preferred. These differences were delineated with more clarity in data gathered from interviews, where comments from participants provided detail regarding the types of collaboration engaged in. This included who teachers preferred to collaborate with and how supportive they found the collaboration. Thus, collaboration emerged as a key practice for teachers that could occur in a variety of ways. The different data sets highlighted teacher perspectives regarding different forms of collaboration as varying in their degree of helpfulness or effectiveness when working with academic underachievers.

Teachers indicated that they chose to collaborate with a range of people when working to support and address academic underachievement with young adolescents. A small number of participants discussed the benefits of creating and using collaborative learning teams, to assist with planning to improve and enhance curriculum, and address learning concerns or barriers for adolescent academic underachievers. Teacher teams and collaborative planning have formed an integral aspect of middle years' practice as was evident in the research literature (Dowden, 2012b; Jacobs, 2010; Pendergast et al., 2005; Shanks & Dowden, 2013). In the main however, teachers described limited forms of collaboration with colleagues. There was a focus on using collaboration to enable the sharing of behavioural management strategies and to seek further background information from learning support colleagues. Teachers also communicated, rather than collaborated with parents regarding goals, work output and homework and assessment tasks. Teachers noted that collaborating

with teacher aides could be beneficial to improving outcomes for academic underachievers and many teachers saw aides as a valuable resource. However, this collaboration appeared to be valued by teachers for the employment of one-on-one support of underachieving students in the classroom and in withdrawal tuition programs. Collaboration emerged as a significant theme, with teachers listing a range of forms of collaboration. Findings from interview data however, qualified the type and nature of the collaboration that teachers used in their practice, which were limited in range and approach.

Certainly, teachers communicated with colleagues, support professionals, teacher aides and parents regarding learning matters, curriculum differentiation and behavioural strategies, and took on board information or support offered and provided. They also appeared to share knowledge regarding the perceived needs of and background factors influencing students they identified as academic underachievers. Teachers highlighted the empowering nature of team collaboration and how this might be utilised to support and enhance activities and pedagogies for all students but especially academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8. Overall, however, the nature of the collaboration described or advocated by teachers, appeared to be limited in scope and not necessarily the result of a coordinated and planned approach to addressing academic underachievement. Nor did there seem to be many opportunities for teachers to collaborate to enhance and improve their learning programs and classroom curriculum.

7.5.3 Connecting to learning through curriculum

Adapting, modifying, improving and negotiating curriculum are all strategies that teachers employ to assist students to connect with and engage in the learning program in the classroom (Pendergast & Danby, 2011). Negotiating and individualising the curriculum, introducing project based learning and democratic processes (Beane, 2013) to suit the interests and needs of individual students is a characteristic of student-centred learning and is effective practice for both young adolescents (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Hunter & Forrest, 2010) and for academic underachievers (McInerney & Smyth, 2014). Within the study, some teachers discussed developing a more creative curriculum, which would require teachers to collaborate in teams to enhance and develop their learning programs as recommended by Jacobs (2010). Teachers indicated that these strategies were effective practices when working with underachieving students but believed further systemic support and resources were needed for them to improving outcomes for academic underachievers through development or adjustment of curriculum.

Teachers described negotiating aspects of the curriculum and learning program to encourage engagement and greater success in meeting learning outcomes, tactics recommended by Hill and Tyson (2014), Hunter and Forrest (2010), Hayes et al., (2006) amongst others. This approach would support an increase in motivation and learner confidence (Bempechat et al., 2011; McInerney & Smyth, 2014). Negotiating and individualising curriculum has been accepted widely as a positive and productive approach to encourage motivation

and engagement for both academic underachievers (MacInerney & Smyth, 2014) and young adolescents (Main, 2010; Pendergast, 2010), as noted by Beane (2015), Dowden (2007, 2012a), Jacobs (2010) and Hayes et al., (2006). However, teacher reliance only on students' personal interests when adapting or improving curriculum content, might not address all learning needs nor provide adequate challenge for engagement and the development and strengthening of intrinsic motivation and mastery learning (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Jacobs, 2010; Dweck, 2006; Hayes et al., 2006). Individualised curriculum needed to be matched with specific pedagogies and goals, to enhance learning, provide further challenge, and to create a meaningful connection to the broader world of the student (Dowden, 2007; Hattie, 2012; Jacobs, 2010; Tomlinson, et al., 2003).

Data findings from questions about practices and strategies indicated the strong value teachers placed on curriculum adjustments and modifications when working with underachieving students in Year 7 and 8. However, while the findings suggested that teachers valued curriculum adjustments and modifications as effective practices, teacher comments outlined a limited range of strategies. Some of the teachers in the study outlined curriculum adjustments and modifications that appeared to be designed to simplify the learning program and outcomes for students. These included breaking up tasks and activities into smaller components and personalising tasks to suit student interests.

As discussed in section 7.3.6 and elaborated on further in section 7.4.5, some of the adjustments conveyed low teacher expectations for academic

underachievers and thus could potentially have a negative on learner confidence overall (Carr et al., 1991; Skilling, 2014). Teachers spoke more frequently and consistently about the demands of the curriculum they were implementing, and the need for flexibility in the delivery; something that they did not always feel was supported within their schools and systems, despite principles, guidelines and system policies promoting learner or student-centred approaches (TCEO, 2012a, 2012b).

7.5.4 Connecting to learning through pedagogy

Highlighted in threads and categories emerging from the data were the use of specific pedagogies to allow academic underachievers more access to and success with learning presented in class. Pedagogical strategies assist with the adaptation of learning activities, allowing greater access to the learning program and encouraging the development of persistence, an important learning behaviour (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Dupreyrat & Marine, 2004; Raphael et al., 2008), in a structured safe and supportive learning environment (Raphael et al., 2008).

The pedagogies teachers described were linked to the curriculum adjustments outlined in the previous section. They focused on the use of scaffolds and steps to assist learners break down complex tasks, and included providing positive feedback to encourage learners, and the use of reminders and monitoring to assist with organisation and management of tasks. Hayes et al., (2006) and Skilling (2014) have outlined a range of pedagogical practices that encourage student engagement and success, noting that curriculum and

pedagogy that are intellectually challenging provide a more empowering learning program and encourage the development of intrinsic motivation and mastery learning goals (Blumenfeld, 1992).

While these techniques support student learning in general, it is not certain that the strategies encourage intrinsic motivation in learning within young adolescent academic underachievers. The academic underachievers identified by the teachers, demonstrated lowered levels of engagement and motivation, lower levels of literacy and numeracy attainment, combined with what teachers described as organisational concerns and poorly developed self-regulatory or learning behaviours (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bernard, 2006). It is possible that adolescent academic underachievers might have interpreted these pedagogical practices that teachers used as confirmation of learning deficits (Dweck, 2006; Raphael et al., 2008).

For example, scaffolds and adjustments which simplify and 'water down' the task or activity could potentially contribute to the development or entrenchment of negative or limiting sets of beliefs (Dweck, 2006) or self-handicapping behaviours and a lack of engagement (Hattie, 2102). Teachers did not indicate in their interviews whether the strategies they used were part of a formal learning plan developed in negotiation or collaboration with the student, parents or other professionals. Reflecting the findings outlined by Skilling (2013) in her study of teacher practices, academic underachievers and mathematics, teachers who participated in the study appeared to impose externally driven strategies to address behaviours, both learning behaviours and cooperative social behaviours. In this regard, the practice of teachers

participating in the study replicated the findings of Tomlinson et al., (2003), in that strategies were improvised adjustments rather than pre-planned strategies and thus might be viewed as limited in their effectiveness. These strategies appeared to centre on the development of short-term goals and outcomes. Furthermore, if these practices were provided to the student without explanation or consultation, academic underachievers might interpret these as confirmation of a deficit.

The adaptive pedagogies used by teachers were implemented as supportive practices designed to allow students to achieve some success within some degree of safety, (Hayes et al., 2006; Luke et al., 2003) as were the intentions behind curriculum differentiation and adjusted goals discussed in the previous section (Crawford, 2008). However, it can be argued that these strategies do not adequately target young adolescent academic underachievers not meeting standard (Dowden, 2007; Tomlinson, et al., 2003). These students have been identified by teachers as students who present with literacy and numeracy difficulties and who benefit from specific strategies designed to improve their understanding and capability (Bernard, 2006). As can be seen in findings from Chapters 4-6, adolescent academic underachievers also demonstrate a lack of connection, participation and avoidant or off task behaviour in the classroom. For these students, the term 'academic underachievement' described a complex, many faceted construct or set of behaviours and abilities. Furthermore, these behaviours and attributes appeared closely linked to but were not necessarily the same as school or classroom disengagement (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Slee, 2014). Perhaps more

significantly for the students, if not their teachers and schools, they were attached to a learning performance which did not meet age and stage standard. The academic underachiever label also included the presence of complex background factors, placing these students in groups described as 'at risk', accompanied by attributes such as a low intrinsic motivation, a lowered sense of hope (Gilman et al., 2006), resilience (Fried & Chapman, 2012) and lower wellbeing in general (Battenberg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013).

7.5.5 Middle years' models of practice

Teachers discussed some of the learning needs of young adolescents and included some practices recommended in middle years' models of practice. These strategies did not appear to be informed by a specific middle years' practices, constructivist or other learning theories for most of the teachers who participated in the study (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast et al., 2005; Richardson, 2003; Shanks & Dowden, 2015). Interpretation of study findings would suggest that teachers participating in the study did not subscribe intentionally to middle years' models of practice to support academic underachievers. Generally, they used practices they believed supportive that were learned or developed through years of professional experience. These practices might include strategies included within a middle years' focus, but as noted by Chadbourne (2001) Dowden (2012a) or Pendergast et al., (2005), such strategies could also form part of a range of approaches informing effective practice. In line with findings by Dowden (2012a) and Shanks and Dowden (2013, 2015), many teachers participating in the study did not indicate that they held a deep knowledge or

understanding of the specific learning needs of young adolescents, despite communicating the need to know and value the learner.

As noted earlier in Chapter 2, section 2.8, it can be argued that young adolescence is as much a cultural and social construction, as it is a physical condition (Bahr, 2005; Luke et al., 2003; Pendergast et al., 2005). Nevertheless, student and teacher perceptions indicated that young adolescent academic underachievers demonstrated attributes, preferences and behaviours like the underachieving students discussed by Bernard (2006) and Ashdown and Bernard (2011). These included low self-confidence, a preference for a positive relationship with their teacher, literacy and numeracy barriers and a lack of connection with the learning program. These could also be improved or diminished by the curriculum, pedagogies and practices used by teachers (Dowden, 2007; Shanks & Dowden, 2013).

Pedagogies used by teachers to support academic underachievers, appeared to be designed to allow academic underachievers access to the learning and curriculum in the classroom, predominantly through the provision of scaffolds, and modifications, thus potentially supporting students perceived deficits or confirming students' lack of confidence in themselves as learners (Luke et al.,2003). These practices did not appear to be informed by an understanding of, or an active subscription, to constructivist learning theories or models (Beane 2013; Dowden, 2007; Richardson, 2003; Shanks & Dowden, 2015). A small number of teachers described strategies to link curriculum and content to the students' personal interests and backgrounds to enhance engagement, strategies in line with student-centred (Dowden, 2007;

Richardson, 2003; TCEO, 2012a;) and constructivist learning models (Richardson, 2003). However, there was a limited understanding regarding the need for rigour in learning, intellectually challenging curriculum, democratic curriculum (Beane, 2013), self-directed, practical or project based learning (Dowden, 2007) or engaging with the curriculum from a critical standpoint mandated within middle year's educational models (Dowden, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006; Jacobs, 2010; Main, 2010). Potentially, some of the strategies used by teachers unintentionally reinforced the marginal status of adolescent academic underachievers as the *borderline* students as described by Carol in Chapter 6, stranded and disempowered from active participation in their own learning (Hayes et al., 2006).

Other aspects of middle years' pedagogical models, including the focus on caring relationships (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Pendergast, 2016; Wentzel, 1998), collaborative planning teams (Jacobs, 2010), connecting curriculum learning to students' personal lives and interests (Dowden, 2007), endeavouring to present meaningful and relevant activities (Pendergast, 2016), were viewed as positive strategies, endorsed by teachers and useful in supporting academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8. These practices emerged as strong and positive themes within the study data and findings, although the actual examples provided of appropriate strategies and practices were narrow in range.

Beyond these strategies, teacher practice appeared to be relatively eclectic and pragmatic. Their practices did not always appear to be underpinned or informed by cohesive sets of beliefs, understandings or purposes regarding middle years' approaches (Beane, 2013; Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005;

Dowden, 2007; Pendergast et al., 2005; Shanks & Dowden, 2015), theories or knowledge regarding young adolescents (Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Pendergast, 2016) constructivist, or other learning theories (Richardson, 2003).

Teacher comments identified themes focused on improving or building relationships, connecting students to the learning program by adapting and modifying curriculum and use of pedagogical strategies such as scaffolding, use of collaboration and the need for organised and structured support. These practices were implemented as adjustments to the usual teaching and learning program and did not seem to be part of an articulated set of learning theories or embedded deeply within a model of practice. The findings indicated that most teachers did not appear to hold perspectives about the benefits of utilising middle years' models of practice or constructivist learning theories. Findings indicated that most teachers who participated in the study did not appear to believe that using specific learning theories or middle years' practices would help address challenges with participation and engagement with the curriculum and classroom learning programs. Based on their responses to specific questions in both questionnaires and interviews, and reflected in the codes and categories ascribed to the data, most teachers articulated a limited degree of knowledge about middle years' education or practices.

As findings indicated in Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, when teachers were asked about their perspectives on educational philosophy and practices in questionnaires and interviews, it became apparent that teachers tended to acknowledge two distinct approaches or methodologies underpinning their teaching approach. Teachers claimed they followed either a 'student-focused'

approach ('student at the centre' or learner-centered) or a subject based approach towards their teaching and methodology. The student-focused approach, predicated on prioritising the learning needs of individual students (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Richardson, 2003) was outlined as a key strategic direction by the Tasmanian Catholic Education in their strategic goals statement, *One in Heart and Mind* (TCEO, 2012a). This publication outlines the Tasmanian Education Office commitment to: "meet the individual needs of students in a way that enhances their sense of personal worth", committing schools and teachers to "provide for learning that is holistic, student-centred and informed by relevant and sound contemporary practice" (TCEO, 2012a, para 8).

Other teachers noted that they followed subject and discipline guidelines primarily to ensure that aspects of the curriculum were delivered to all students in line with standards and outcomes outlined by ACARA. While it appeared that teachers claimed to be mainly influenced by either student-focused learning (TCEO, 2012a) or were curriculum or subject focused in their approach, most teachers in the study indicated that relationships were considered the key aspect of effective teaching practice.

7.5.6 Barriers and challenges: Managing time and meeting the standard

Teachers subscribed to a well-articulated belief that managing time was a predominant challenge for teachers and students in Years 7 and 8, influencing both practice and student learning outcomes. They relied on 'meeting the standard' as

an established and accepted guide for assessing student achievement against Australian curriculum standards for each year level.

The professional pressures and system expectations outlined by teachers to ensure all students met the age and stage standard within given parameters and time-frames were perceived as barriers to effective practice in supporting academic underachievers in the classroom. Teachers articulated perspectives that conveyed their beliefs regarding the potential of all students to learn. These perspectives have been linked in the literature to practices to improve motivation and engagement (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008), and strategies that enhance student access and connection to learning (Tadich et al., 2007). Nevertheless, teachers indicated that they were time poor and that they had little time to enrich their practice or to develop individualised learning for the academic underachievers they taught. As pointed out by Tomlinson et al., (2003) "teachers are more likely to find adaptations to be more desirable than feasible" (p. 122).

The use of the Australian Curriculum as a benchmark standard formed the parameters of teacher practice described by teachers and students in Chapters 5 and 6. This practice was supported by practical strategies, centring on curriculum adjustments, collaboration with parents and colleagues and building relationships. Practices articulated by teachers or discussed by students in the study did not always appear to link to the beliefs teachers described or claimed to follow in interviews or questionnaires.

Teachers indicated that their management of time and the professional responsibilities entailed in meeting the standard could have a negative influence on developing relationships, collaboration and their development of curriculum

and pedagogies to support academic underachievers. These constraints influenced the amount of time teachers might use to strengthen relationships, learn more about the specific student's learning requirements, or use this knowledge to effectively adjust curriculum to the individual student's needs (Attard, 2011; Dowden, 2007; Pendergast & Danby, 2011). Students responding to the survey in the second data set also appeared to believe that managing time presented a significant challenge to successful learning and enjoyment of school. They too demonstrated significant concerns with meeting or not meeting the standard in Year 7. Both students and teachers noted the prevalence and pressure of external influences on student learning. Meeting year level curriculum standards and the effective management of time were perceived by both teachers and students as barriers that had a significant impact on a teacher's ability to adjust curriculum, develop relationships and collaborate effectively, or a student's ability to connect to learning in the classroom.

In addition to having time to develop and build productive relationships with academic underachievers, teachers also indicated that lack of time limited their opportunities to identify and provide individual support, or to adapt curriculum and pedagogies to meet student needs. Thus, it could be argued that these teachers were more task-focused in their pedagogical approaches in the classroom. They believed that most young adolescent academic underachievers needed specific sets of supports that could be implemented within the classroom but were also part of a broader school or system response. A prevalent finding from data sets 1 and 3 were teacher perspectives that structural changes and additional resources to promote specific types of

collaborative practice could make a significant difference to student outcomes. Teachers envisioned external structures providing support through time release for structured meeting times to enable the sharing of resources, information and strategies. They proposed regular meeting times with colleagues to discuss the learning needs of specific academic underachievers and the provision of resources for teacher aides to assist academic underachievers in their classrooms. Teachers advocated aide time to assist with specific support for student academic underachievers through one-to-one tuition, both within and outside the classroom, particularly to assist with literacy and numeracy difficulties or to help students to access and engage with the curriculum in the classroom. Thus, teachers held the perspective that young adolescent academic underachievers would benefit from a tailored and structured approach to assist with identification and further support to enable them to meet the standard.

Teacher beliefs that time constraints, which impacted on their planning and development of the curriculum and prevented them from doing more for academic underachievers, needs to be noted at this point as a perspective that has a strong influence over teacher practice and student outcomes. This interpretation of the findings is supported by Hayes et al., (2006), who noted in their longitudinal study of Queensland teachers that "these teachers offered structural reasons for the lack of intellectually demanding pedagogies in their classrooms" (p. 470). When teachers in the study highlighted time constraints and the impact of restricted time on some of their practices, there appeared to be a tacit understanding that this factor was beyond their control, very much in the way that 'the standard' was also an externally driven and dominant

influencer over their practice and pedagogies. Managing time and meeting the standard appeared to be intrinsically connected.

When teachers identified young adolescent academic underachievers in their classrooms, they identified students who were not meeting year level Australian curriculum or Tasmanian curriculum standards[4]. While teachers did, at points, critique aspects of the educational system, including the inadequacy of government initiatives and 'packages' designed to improve student outcomes and wellbeing, few appeared to engage in a critical appraisal of the 'standard', or of the curriculum they offered. Nor did teachers acknowledge that using external standards and benchmarks uncritically could reinforce student development of 'performance goals' based on external motivators rather than encouraging the development of learning goals based on intrinsic goals, which increase mastery and learner competence (Carr et al., 1991; Dweck, 2006).

The impetus and drive in classroom practice towards ensuring that all students met the standard, may have held a subtle but consistent influence on student development of learner motivation and confidence for their students (Carr et al., 1991; Dweck, 2006; Gilman et al., 2006; Pendergast et al., 2005). This belief may be a particularly influential belief for the young adolescent academic underachievers in the study.

7.6 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has presented a discussion of the findings from all three data sets, relating the findings back to the primary research questions using an

[4] At the time of data collection, the Australian Curriculum was available in four subjects including English, Mathematics, Science and History.

organisational paradigm of three broad overarching themes: perceptions, perspectives and practice. The summary provides an overview of key findings linked to the research questions and overall thesis topic; identifying and supporting adolescent academic underachievers in the classroom.

Teachers identified academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8 as a complex group who presented with a range of differing needs and background circumstances, who usually displayed the following attributes: they demonstrated low participation in class activities; produced limited evidence of learning; demonstrated challenging or avoidant behaviour; had low level literacy and numeracy difficulties; and an irregular pattern of attendance. It was apparent from the themes, categories and codes prevalent in the data, that teachers identified young adolescent academic underachievers as students who faced barriers in connecting with learning programs offered in the classroom. These included the presence of background factors that might impact on learning and motivation and organisational challenges.

The presence of different factors related to backgrounds or socio-economic status, combined with literacy and numeracy difficulties, would suggest that students might, depending on circumstances or prevailing government policies, fit within 'at risk' groups and qualify for targeted funding for specific programs where available. However, as a distinct group, the academic underachievers identified by teachers formed a marginal or 'borderline' collective who were perceived to be *falling through the cracks* and not meeting Australian or Tasmanian Curriculum standards as outlined by ACARA and the Tasmanian Department of Education. This group of academic

underachievers identified by teachers did not appear to qualify for specific targeted funding or support based on the classroom teacher's understanding.

Student comments provided evidence that many students participating in the study believed they were primarily responsible for connecting to their learning in the classroom, for staying engaged and for meeting the standard. However, missing from the student data was a sense of control over their learning. Themes identified from student data suggested that the Year 7 students surveyed did not expect to engage in negotiation around the curriculum, learning outcomes and what was presented within the classroom. Nor did the students' comments indicate that they set specific goals for learning beyond broad learning behaviour goals around improving concentration (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012) or improvement in their grades. Some students admitted they needed more specific support from teachers to participate in classroom activities and many students indicated difficulties with connecting to the learning program.

Engagement and connection were strong latent categories that emerged from the student data. Findings from the student data implied that students held learning aspirations that one would expect of young adolescents: they wished the learning to be relevant, interesting and meaningful; they needed support from teachers to help them remain on task; and they benefitted from opportunities to talk and engage in group work that allowed them to share knowledge and construct meaning with their peers. They articulated clearly the findings reported by a range of research and leading educators, that effective learning for young adolescents needed to provide intellectual challenge and

stimulation. It needed to connect with the students' greater world or community (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006), and allow for the development of autonomy and learner self-regulation through effective pedagogy (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Fried & Chapman, 2012; Skilling, 2011). Effective learning programs encourages the development of intrinsic motivation, self-regulation (Fried & Chapman, 2012) and mastery learning goals (Dweck, 2006; Pendergast et al; 2005).

While the teachers in the study predominantly claimed either a student-centred (Dowden, 2007; TCEO, 2015) or curriculum and discipline-centred approach towards their teaching, findings from interviews suggested that in fact teachers used eclectic and pragmatic practices to underpin their teaching, with an acknowledgement that positive relationships with teachers were important to young adolescents and were pivotal to successful learning outcomes. They also generally appeared to subscribe to a belief that all students could learn, even if they learnt at different rates and levels. However, the strength of two categories that emerged from all three data sets suggested that two latent or tacit sets of beliefs formed part of their perspective and influenced teachers' overall approach to learning and teaching in classroom practice. Beliefs were:

1. Data from the interviews tended to support findings that the teachers used an eclectic set of six practices built over years of classroom experience and these were rarely specific examples of a focused 'middle years' approach (Dowden, 2007, 2012a; Shanks & Dowden, 2013) or any other particular model of learning.

2. Teachers subscribed to a specific belief underpinning their practice that all students can learn, although comments made by teachers in interviews also differentiated student ability in learning, noting that some students did not learn at the same rate and with the same ease as others.

Furthermore, teachers participating in the study did not appear to follow a formally structured set of practices in their curriculum or pedagogies to support academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8. Building positive relationships with academic underachievers was considered an important and integral pedagogical practice for teachers, although teachers believed that developing these could be a challenge. Teachers also advocated attempting to engage academic underachievers by adjusting their programs to allow a more personalised connection to curriculum where possible. Most teachers recognised that using specific pedagogies to support students, such as adjusting, modifying or being flexible around curriculum were effective primary supportive practices for underachieving students and promoted the use of these as supportive practices in the classroom. They also believed that collaboration with colleagues, one on one support from teacher aides and communicating with parents to be helpful, especially with the completion of assignments and helping the student to develop a more positive attitude in the classroom.

However, while teachers reflected on aspects of their practice when teaching academic underachievers, there was less evidence to suggest that they engaged in ongoing critical reflection of the curriculum taught, or that they were engaged in any sustained constructivist or rigorous middle years' approach

(Dowden, 2007), or that they examined the range and extent of their pedagogical practices in the classroom. Nor did many appear to question using 'the standard' as a measure of achievement. Furthermore, it has been posited in this chapter that aspects of the curriculum, and the pedagogies teachers used to support academic underachievers might discourage mastery learning and motivation and reinforce feelings of low confidence and negative self-beliefs in young adolescent academic underachievers.

The following chapter presents the conclusions from the study. It highlights the main findings, background context and complexities of the study, together with the contributions made to the field, limitations, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school (Shakespeare, Henry VI, Part 2).

8.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This study has posited that the identification and addressing of academic underachievement in young adolescents represents a complex issue for Australian secondary school teachers. To begin with, the study indicated that defining and categorising the nature of academic underachievement is by no means a straightforward task. As noted in earlier chapters, academic underachievement is a complex construct. The central definition of academic underachievement in the study was predicated on definitions first outlined by McCall (1992), Reis and McCoach (2000), Griffin (1988), Krause and Krause (1981), and includes students who consistently fail to achieve academic potential, or attain expected educational outcomes or grades as predicted by standardised testing or professional assessment. This definition however, is a simplified and practical statement, which does not draw attention to the political and sociological contexts that comprise this phenomenon. The primary concern of teachers participating in the study, focused on students with no formally identified learning disabilities or exceptionalities, who were not meeting year level standards of achievement based on Australian curriculum guidelines and standards. Predominantly teachers identified academic underachievers as students who appeared to be, as some teachers noted, falling through the cracks and not meeting standard in their classrooms.

8.2 Findings: How Teacher Perceptions and Perspectives Influence Practice

Teacher perceptions regarding the academic underachievers they taught in Year 7 and 8, were that these students appeared to experience literacy and numeracy difficulties, and had low levels of participation and engagement in classroom activities, indicating potentially a deficit of self-regulatory or learner behaviours to rely on (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). The academic underachievers described by teachers in the study were not motivated students. They, and their teachers, also found developing the productive relationships that young adolescents require for learning somewhat challenging, as supported in the research by Blumenfeld (1992). They did not appear to be connected to the learning in the classroom and demonstrated a low level of participation in class activities including a low work output. Findings from studies by Von Battenburg-Eddes and Jolles (2013), highlighted a correlation between low achievement with lowered levels of wellbeing.

As noted previously in the study, adolescents in Year 7 and 8 seek to develop their autonomy and strengthen their confidence as learners in secondary school (Bahr, 2005; Shanks & Dowden, 2013), managing their transition from primary school learning structures while continuing to develop self-reliant learner behaviours (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). Adolescent academic underachievers however, will attempt to connect and participate in learning, whilst potentially holding limiting sets of beliefs or implicit negative theories (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Dupreyat & Marine, 2005) about themselves as learners (Dweck, 2006; Smyth & McInerney, 2014). This possibility was

indicated in the findings emerging from both teacher and student data sets that indicated learner confidence issues and a lack of student connection to learning.

The academic underachievers discussed in this study often possessed the added complication of background factors frequently impacting on their overall wellbeing (Von Battenburg-Eddes & Jolles, 2013), potentially placing them in marginalised or 'at risk' groups due to poverty (Dunne & Gazeley, 2008), or other complicating life circumstances (Luke et al., 2003; Smyth & Mcinerney, 2014). While these background factors might qualify such students for specific targeted programs, the reality existing in classrooms described by the teachers was that these students were failing and were not accessing any individual or targeted support through funding programs or grants.

As stated earlier, teachers participating in this study appeared to rely on the standard as an external criterion to drive classroom learning, and indicated that their curriculum and pedagogical practices were considerably influenced by time constraints over which they had no control. Teachers recommended adapting and modifying curriculum for academic underachievers. They indicated however that it was difficult to provide or build in the appropriate and individual levels of challenge, autonomy and interest in tasks and activities to meet the needs of their diverse classes, [a finding supported by Blumenfeld, 1992] without accessing extra support from funding programs or resources providing time for teacher collaboration and curriculum development (Hayes et al., 2006). The teachers reported a greater reliance on extrinsic controls and motivators to support students rather than encouraging or developing the

development and use of internal or self-regulatory learning strategies in young adolescent academic underachievers (Fried & Chapman, 2012).

Several teachers demonstrated awareness of the benefits of using pedagogical strategies to allow academic underachievers to connect with learning through topics of personal interest, providing some learner-centered and project-based learning (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007). However, this did not seem to include providing students with the opportunity to engage critically with the learning outcomes and standards provided (Beane, 2015; Dowden, 2007; Hayes et al., 2006). Teachers might advocate or articulate positive pedagogical beliefs and understandings about the need for supportive relationships, flexibility, modification or differentiation of curriculum and improved pedagogies for learning. However, for young adolescent academic underachievers, standardised curriculum goals and 'big picture' motivators such as meeting the standard did not necessarily encourage the development of intrinsic motivation and autonomy. Standardised goals based on meeting Australian Curriculum benchmarks emphasise external and extrinsic performance-based goals as measures of student achievement, and this could impact negatively on the underachieving students' developing identities as successful learners and their levels of confidence.

While the curriculum was subject to some scrutiny and calls for flexibility around delivery, most of the teacher participants (and the Year 7 student cohort surveyed) nevertheless appeared to believe that the two influencing factors, managing time and meeting the standard were the primary barriers that prevented them from providing adequate support for

underachieving students in their classroom. Teacher perspectives were that limited improvements could be made for academic underachievers, without the provision of further time and resources. Many teachers in the interviews expressed frustration and concern over these two dominant influencers of classroom practice, and were critical of the systems and structures they worked within.

Other underlying themes also emerged from the data, indicating further influences at play in student learning outcomes for academic underachievers. These included the disconnection from learning in the classroom in general (Skilling, 2014), the need for an engaging and appropriate curriculum (Dowden, 2007; Pendergast, 2016) and supportive pedagogical relationships (Attard, 2011; Shanks & Dowden, 2013). Further support for the development and extension of academic underachievers' literacy and numeracy skills and understanding (Hayes et al., 2006; Luke et al.,2003) were also identified as a need by the teachers and by many of the Year 7 students participating in the study.

When supporting academic underachievers, teachers used an eclectic and pragmatic range of practices and pedagogies, formed from professional experiences and knowledge, presented as supportive practices designed to help the student connect to the curriculum and achieve passing grades against the age and stage standard. However, the use and application of some of these strategies were not extensive. Pedagogies and practices did not appear to be consistently embedded within a systemic or focused team approach, nor did they appear to be informed by middle years' learning theories or other learning

models. Teachers appeared to have a limited understanding of learner-centred learning as a specific learning model influencing curriculum design and classroom pedagogies. They considered it a useful strategy when modifying tasks, having identified a lack of engagement or connection with classroom learning as a key concern for academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8. However, they did not consistently advocate constructivist or learner- centered curriculum to address the concerns outlined.

Teachers used different pedagogical practices to support academic underachievers within the classroom. Practices used to address underachievement in the classroom included strengthening relationships to enhance student connection to learning, collaboration with colleagues and teacher aides, communications with parents, and improvements and modifications to curriculum and pedagogy. For many teachers in the study, their pedagogical practices were based on specific adjustments using remedial support such as scaffolds, adjustments and task modification. These practices did not appear to belong to a specific teaching approach, nor did findings indicate that teachers held strong beliefs about the learning approach underpinning practices used.

Finally, collaboration was highlighted by teachers as a significant strategy for improvement, but in practice, the collaboration occurring for many of the teachers in the study was relatively limited. These influences operated in addition to the time constraints and discipline-focused teaching approach and led to teachers mandating meeting the standard over the development of intrinsic learning skills, aptitudes and motivation in their students.

It is proposed that some of the practices that teachers used, unintentionally, contributed to or reinforced students' lack of confidence, furthering the disempowerment or alienation of students from their learning. Indeed, findings suggested that teachers participating in the study believed that managing time and limited resources were the primary influential factors in their ability to identify and to support young adolescent academic underachievers. Furthermore, teachers these factors to be largely beyond their control. They were critical of systemic support and targets, including the amount of time required to implement the strategies, lack of time for effective collaboration, instruction and learning in general.

However, findings also indicated that teachers held the perspective that curriculum and pedagogy offered in the classroom had the potential to influence academic underachievers' motivation and engagement with the curriculum in Year 7 and 8. These perspectives were reinforced by data emerging from student surveys in the second data set. In this data set themes emerged that indicated Year 7 students held deficit beliefs regarding their confidence as learners and their ability to connect to the curriculum and participate actively in classroom activities and programs. This was a challenge which impacted on their overall learning and engagement in their first year of secondary school.

Teachers held limited perspectives and understanding regarding specific learning needs of young adolescents. Their knowledge of young adolescents, in most cases, appeared to be based on previous professional experience teaching students in Year 7 and 8, rather than on any specific model of practice or learning theory followed. Thus, most teachers in the study, while proposing

enhanced relationships, collaboration and adapting curriculum and pedagogical practices, did not subscribe to middle years' models of practice. The strategies that they suggested, while providing some support for academic underachievers in Year 7 and 8, were practices that could be developed further in depth and rigour and embedded more firmly within cohesive evidence-based learning theories or models of practice. Given a lack of critical engagement with the curriculum and the range of remedial strategies offered to underachieving students, practices used by teachers potentially reinforced self-limiting beliefs or fixed mindsets in young adolescent academic underachievers and consolidated their lack of confidence in themselves as learners (Bernard, 2011; Dweck, 1999, 2006).

8.3 Limitations of the Study

The study was designed to explore how secondary school teachers identified and addressed academic underachievement in Year 7 and 8, using empirical data within a mixed methods' paradigm. While both quantitative and qualitative data were collected, the study was predominantly qualitative in nature. As outlined in Chapter 3, despite a range of strategies employed, uptake of surveys for the first data set was limited and thus a smaller range of participants completed the survey than was initially expected or regarded as optimal. Additionally, as the study design formed part of a doctorate, there were some limitations of resources, including time and opportunities for data collection. Therefore, the study site and context was restricted to regional Tasmania. Thus, findings, while interesting, may pose more questions than they

answer. The research topic and case study explored a problem that extended beyond the regional context, and reflected issues common to secondary school teachers and their young adolescent students across Australia. However, it cannot be assumed necessarily that these findings apply to all Australian Secondary School teachers, or that students in other schools and regions experience the same concerns regarding their academic transition and program.

While respondents to teacher questionnaires were relatively evenly distributed between both genders, most teacher participants for interviews forming the third data set were female. Furthermore, the typical underachieving student described in their interviews were male. However, the scope of the study did not allow for a separate focus on boys' education and gender concerns. A future study could investigate this connection especially in relation to perceptions on academic underachievement and participation and engagement in the classroom.

The data for Chapter 5, were gathered from an open-ended reflective survey of 178 Year 7 students from one of the regional Catholic Colleges. The data may reflect findings from the specific site, as is characteristic of a case study, and may be more representative of a school culture rather than a generalised finding applying to all Year 7 students within Australia. There was a limited amount of information of student perceptions on the practices and curriculum that they were presented with. While there was strong evidence from student comments that their school and teachers based the curriculum on Australian Curriculum standards, the perspectives and practices used by their teachers remains unexplored. Thus, this data set did not gather information

regarding the philosophical perspectives underpinning the curriculum and pedagogy that this cohort of students experienced. Nor did it evaluate specifically whether the use of constructionist pedagogies (Beane, 2013; Dowden, 2007, 2012), or reducing content, improving pacing and allowing some flexibility in the program would address student concerns more effectively overall.

The study design and set up was predicated on a constructivist paradigm and premise. As such, it presented an interpretation, or story, of findings from the data. It has been set in a context, a specific educational landscape or setting, questions have been posed as a quest or challenge, and findings collected from actors or participants that may be considered unique to the region or setting. The story of this data also undoubtedly contains elements of the researcher's expertise and potential biases, probably unavoidable as a researcher who both researched and worked within this system and context as an experienced professional.

8.4 Implications of the Study

These findings may point to additional challenges to catering for young adolescent academic underachievers in the classroom. Teacher perceptions encouraged the construction of deficit models for academic underachievers, in the study, as the practices they employed were largely remedial. These included practices which were limited in range, primarily designed to support students to meet an unchallenged and non-negotiable 'standard'. The lack of sustained critical reflection on practice or use of a cohesive model of learning, resulted in

teachers presenting curriculum and pedagogies to students that were not aligned with student preferences for learning to be meaningful, engaging, rigorous and related to the external world of the young adolescent learner. Connecting to learning and academic transition to secondary school has been shown to be challenging for many students, achievers and underachievers alike. Teachers in the study identified academic underachievers as students who demonstrated more than the usual barriers faced by young adolescents in their foundation years of secondary school. These were students who presented with additional difficulties with academic transitions and literacy and numeracy barriers. They demonstrated challenging and avoidant behaviours which impeded the development of positive relationships between teacher and student that assist to enhance connection with curriculum and participation and engagement with learning. While many of the students participating in the survey indicated some barriers to connection to classroom learning, it could be argued that for the academic underachievers, barriers to accessing the curriculum and learning program were even more pronounced.

Teachers advocated for the provision of resources by schools and systems to assist with the identification and support needs for individual academic underachievers to address these concerns. This resourcing would assist to provide release time for sharing and collaboration with colleagues regarding individual learning and behavioural needs, addressing background factors influencing the performance and behaviours of academic underachievers, and the provision of more aide time for tuition. Teachers also believed that school and system structures could be more supportive regarding

teaching young adolescent academic underachievers, particularly those in Year 7. Some teachers advocated the need for providing more release time specifically for teachers of Year 7 to work in collaborative planning teams for the improvement of curriculum and pedagogies and sharing of knowledge about curriculum and students, including academic underachievers. They were concerned about the educational outcomes for the academic underachievers they taught, reflected on their teaching practices and methodological approaches when working with these students, and could see that some of the structures that both students and teachers operated within were not effective for meeting student needs.

Many teachers implied in their comments that schools and systems did not allow enough time for them to meet their professional obligations and responsibilities. Thus, in managing competing demands and external expectations, teachers did not believe they had time or the resources to adequately address the learning and behavioural needs of academic underachievers.

The strategies employed by teachers such as building relationships with academic underachievers, providing extra tuition, and sharing strategies with colleagues, would seem designed to benefit the young adolescent academic underachievers identified in the study. However, these strategies, in themselves, might not adequately address difficulties academic underachievers had when accessing and connecting to classroom learning programs and activities. This was a factor which characterised the academic underachievers described by

teachers in the study, and which also emerged as a latent theme in the findings from the cohort of Year 7 students surveyed.

Furthermore, teacher perceptions and perspectives regarding the students identified as academic underachievers may reinforce young adolescents' lack of confidence and self-limiting beliefs about themselves as learners. When combined with a limited range of pedagogical practices and adherence to the standard curriculum as a 'given', not as a constructed body of knowledge that might be challenged or indeed negotiated, young adolescent academic underachievers could find their ability to connect with and participate in classroom learning just too difficult a barrier to overcome.

8.5 Recommendations

There are many recommendations for future research that could be made from this specific study which has been predominantly exploratory in design. Increasing the scope and scale of the study, to include schools from different regions, states and systems and conducting more extensive and rigorous quantitative instruments could assist in confirming whether this specific set of findings applies beyond a set of teachers and students working within a defined and, what might be considered, a somewhat isolated region and system.

Survey instruments and interview protocols could be developed that included more probing questions on the relationship between the use of teacher learning theories and models of practice and young adolescent engagement and connection to classroom learning. Survey or interview questions eliciting

specific information expanding on teacher understanding about the relationship between specific pedagogies and the development of fixed mind sets and self-limiting beliefs in young adolescents and academic underachievers, could also provide a more comprehensive and focused set of data on these aspects of the topics.

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the scope of the study focused on teacher identification and teacher practice within the research site outlined thus many of the background or contributing factors were not explored in depth.

While middle years' models of practice and the perspectives of an entire Year 7 student cohort were included in the scope of the study, the primary topic was evaluating how classroom teachers conceptualised and supported academic underachievers in the Year 7 and 8 classroom setting. Thus, this was not a study focusing purely on middle years' education or models of practice. There would be the potential to explore the topic from an alternative perspective predicated on exploring academic underachievement as a specific middle years' phenomenon. This could investigate the achievement levels of young adolescents provided with constructivist curricula and middle years' pedagogies and assess the impact of learner-centered programs on underachieving students.

Future studies could explore the many different factors that have influenced or are linked with academic underachievement in young adolescents. These factors, which included gender, wellbeing, emotional regulation and its relationship to academic achievement, the impacts of bullying, and socio-

economic, cultural and language issues, formed part of the background to this study and could provide opportunities for further research studies.

8.6 Final Words

This study maintained an intimate focus on exploring teacher identification and support of academic underachievers in the early years of secondary school, and sought to map the complexity of these concerns and provide further insights on teacher professional understanding and practice. It could also be considered as a study that links to and connects with a broader story of underachievement and connection and engagement with learning within Australian secondary schools.

The study makes a claim to providing a substantive contribution to professional practice and knowledge by highlighting academic underachievement as a current and complex issue of concern for both teachers and young adolescents at the micro level. The study has explored different contexts and facets that comprise this phenomenon including research on student disengagement in the middle years of schooling, underachievement amongst groups 'at risk' or marginalised groups, and academic underachievement among young adolescents with complex needs. However, it has been claimed within the study that there is limited research investigating how Australian teachers identify adolescent academic underachievers at the grass roots level, the characteristics and factors they believe to be significant, and the practices they employ to support these students. As such, the study

focused on a complex, multi-faceted and significant issue that warranted further investigation.

From the findings obtained from three different data sets, the study has also made a claim that teachers do not utilise cohesive learning theories or models of practice when supporting young adolescent academic underachievers and appear to possess limited understanding of such models or their usefulness. While teachers used some practices that fit within middle years' educational models, these were usually isolated pragmatic strategies or individual adjustments. The strategies were often remedial in nature. They were implemented by teachers to help the young adolescents meet standard learning outcomes through modification of basic Australian curriculum outcomes and standards. Curriculum and pedagogies were adjusted to allow access so that underachieving students could connect to the classroom learning program or curriculum to some extent. Findings from the study highlighted the significance of teacher understanding and effectiveness in utilising practices that value the learner, ensure effective collaboration with colleagues, parents and support staff, and strengthen and enhance student participation and connection to learning. Nevertheless, findings from students in Year 7 indicated that learner confidence was an issue for a significant number of student participants and not only academic underachievers. Practices teachers used to support underachieving students in Year 7 and 8 may, have, unintentionally, and perhaps surprisingly for the teachers concerned, encouraged or consolidated self-limiting beliefs and low learner confidence within the academic underachievers identified.

Findings from the study also indicate a pressing need to reposition middle years' models of practice as an integral component of the education of young adolescents in their first years of secondary school, and as part of their successful academic achievement overall. It can be argued that while this issue continues to form a secondary or minor agenda in Australian schooling, not much will change for many young adolescents attending Australian schools, including those identified as young adolescent academic underachievers.

An overarching focus of the study aimed to connect broader empirical theory and evidence to specific professional experience and practice. An inter-textual aim was to connect disparate findings across three differing data sets to consider teacher practices and student achievement in Year 7 and 8. Finally, this was a study that asked questions about the importance of teacher perceptions and perspectives and the influence of these on their practice when identifying and supporting academic underachievers. Connection to learning, participation in the classroom, and learner-confidence, are the keys to this story, for as outlined consistently by the teachers who participated, all students can learn.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A Teacher Questionnaire Sample

Faculty of Education: School of Graduate Research

UTAS

NORTHERN TASMANIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHER SURVEY

Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 and 8: Identifying and supporting underachieving students in the middle years.

- This survey is designed to collect base-line data on how teachers in Northern Tasmania identify and support underachieving students in Year 7 and 8.
- An information sheet that outlines privacy, ethics approvals and consent information has been included with this survey as well as a letter of invitation, outlining the parameters of the study.
- Completing this survey is voluntary and the information you provide will be anonymous.
- Completion of this survey should take no more than 15 minutes of your time. There are 16 questions in total. 9 of the questions are multiple choice or single word answers. The other questions require a short answer response .

CONTACTS: Penelope Ludicke
HDR Student
Faculty of Education
University of Tasmania
Email contact: penny.ludicke@stpatricks.tas.edu.au

Tracey Muir
Graduate Research Coordinator
Faculty of Education
University of Tasmania: 03 6324 3261

PLEASE RETURN SURVEY IN REPLY-PAID ADDRESSED ENVELOPE TO:
P. Ludicke
P.O. Box 401
Prospect, Tasmania 7025

Faculty of Education: School of Graduate Research

UTAS

Teaching Context and Experience:

Q1. How many years of experience do you have as a teacher?

Q2. Do you teach students in Year 7 and/or 8?

(Please choose the most accurate response below.)

- I teach Year 7 and 8 students regularly
- I teach Year 7 and 8 students occasionally.
- I have taught Year 7 and 8 in the past but am not currently teaching students in these year levels.
- I do not teach these year levels.

Q3. Please indicate which groups best describe your teaching area/s.

- Languages and Humanities
- Mathematics and Sciences
- The Arts
- Technologies
- Health and Physical Education
- Digital and Information Technologies
- Learning support
- Other

Q4. Does your teaching role require you to work with Year 7 and 8 in other ways? Yes/No

If you answered yes, please indicate which of the choices provided describe the other ways in which you work with these students.

- Pastoral care roles and duties (eg. Home-group teacher, House or Year level head, AST role, Pastoral advisor or Deputy Principal).
- Curriculum and learning roles (eg. Team leader, Department Head, Curriculum Leader, Deputy Principal).
- Co-curricular roles and duties (sports, cultural, other).
- Learning support roles and duties.

Faculty of Education: School of Graduate Research

UTAS

Teachers, experiences and beliefs:

Q5. If you teach (or have taught in the past) Year 7 and 8 students, how would you describe your experiences?

- Challenging
- Challenging but also rewarding
- Largely rewarding: I enjoy teaching these year levels.
- I teach students in these year levels but do not find teaching year 7 and 8 to be particularly challenging or rewarding.
- Other (please describe below).

_____

_____

_____

Q6. Do you subscribe to a particular teaching philosophy or set of beliefs about teaching and learning? Please select an answer that best fits your personal beliefs and experiences as a teacher.

- I believe in and usually follow middle years philosophies and practices for the education of young adolescents.
- My teaching is based around subject-based knowledge and pedagogy and the Australian Curriculum guidelines.
- I follow a 'student centered' approach in my teaching. I adapt curriculum and my pedagogy to meet the needs of the students.
- I believe the principles of effective teaching are similar for the majority of students. I use these approaches as my guiding philosophy.

Q7. Considering your answer above, can you briefly describe some of the approaches you might use in the classroom when teaching young adolescents?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q8. Would you consider all, or any of the approaches mentioned above as applying specifically to students in Year 7 and 8?

_____

_____

_____

Q.9 Select from the choices given, those that best represent your experiences when working with underachieving students. You can select more than one response. I believe that the students did not meet expected learning outcomes because:

- Students did not attempt to engage with the learning activities or curriculum.
- Students had difficulty understanding the learning activities or curriculum due to literacy or numeracy barriers.
- Students found it hard to engage with the activities and curriculum due to an identified barrier or learning difficulty or disability.
- Students did not attempt to participate or engage with the learning or curriculum for other reasons (eg. wellbeing issues or health reasons).
- Students did not engage or participate in learning activities or curriculum for behavioural reasons.

Factors and characteristics of underachieving students:

Q10. How would you define the term 'underachievement'?

_____

_____

_____

Q11. Please tick the factors that you consider are significant when you observe a student who might be considered an underachieving student'?

- The student rarely completes tasks in the classroom.
- The student does not complete tasks for summative assessment or homework assignments.
- The student does not engage in learning activities at age or year level but will attempt work set at a lower year level.

- The student struggles with organisation and management of learning.
- The student presents with literacy or numeracy barriers.
- The student is often disengaged in the classroom.
- The student presents with behavioural challenges in the classroom.

Q12. If you have indicated multiple factors, which ones do you find most significant and why?

Q13. Are there any other factors, not mentioned above, that you consider important when identifying underachieving students?

Practices and strategies:

Q14. When working with students who might be considered as 'underachievers' with whom might you collaborate?

- Teacher aides
- Other colleague teachers
- Guidance counsellors
- Learning support professionals
- Parents and guardians of the student
- Year level or faculty leaders
- School leadership team members

Faculty of Education: School of Graduate Research

UTAS

Q15. What teaching strategies do you find most helpful when working with underachieving students?

- Curriculum adjustments and modifications
- Change of pedagogical style and modifications
- Use of teacher aide or volunteer to work one on one with student
- Use of peer coaching or peer learning team
- Tutoring student outside of scheduled lesson time
- 'One on one' tutoring of the student within the classroom lesson
- Further development of 'teacher-student' relationship
- Use of sanctions (detentions) for non-compliance
- Parent-teacher conferences/communications
- Use of technology within classroom and lesson

Q16. Please state briefly why you found these strategies helpful:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

UTAS

Thank you for taking this survey. Your participation and experience is valuable to us, and has been greatly appreciated.

Appendix B Semi-Structured Interview Schedule-Sample Questions

Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 & 8: Identifying and Supporting Underachieving Students in the Middle Years.

Interview schedule: Interview -semi-structured

Introduction

The purpose of this interview is to talk to you about your experiences as a teacher who works, or has worked, with underachieving students in Year Seven and Eight. As you know, I am conducting a study on this which considers the following questions:

- *What factors and characteristics do teachers consider when they identify underachieving students in Years Seven and Eight?*
- *What supports and practises do teachers use to support underachieving students in this age group?*
- *Who do teachers collaborate with to help support these students?*

The focus of the study is on teacher experiences and beliefs-what it is that teachers know, understand and do when teaching students in these year levels. This can also include what it is that teachers can do, given the parameters and structures they work within.

5. **Can you tell me a little bit about yourself as a teacher- including what subjects you teach, and what groups of students you are currently teaching?**

6. **How would you describe your approach to teaching and learning?**

7. **What are your understandings and beliefs around middle schooling?**

8. **Have you worked (or are currently working with) any students in Year Seven and Eight that you (or someone else) have identified as an underachiever?**

9. **Can you describe to me the student/s and how they are currently underachieving?**

10. **Do you think that the student/s underachievement has been going on for a while-or is it a recent trend?**

11. **What characteristics or factors do you consider significant when identifying this student/s as an underachiever?**

12. **What sorts of things do you do to support this student?**

13. **Are there other people who you collaborate with when working with this student/s?**

(Other teachers, teacher aides, support staff, pastoral care or curriculum leaders, family members…)?

14. **What sorts of things do you do when working with students x, y or z to support them?**

(These things might include trying out new strategies, gaining background information, discussing concerns, requesting further assessment, seeking additional support or resources, etc.)

15. **How helpful or effective do you think these supports are?**

16. **What sorts of things do you consider when you have noted an improvement or measure of success with the student/s?**

(Examples might include: the student might have homework completed, show greater engagement in class, fewer absences, student appears happier, few behavioural concerns, improvement in understanding, improved relationships, improvement in literacy numeracy outcomes –test scores).

17. **Would there be any difficulties or obstacles that you believe might prevent you from working with the student to assist their achievement?**

(These might include things like meeting curriculum targets for year level, school operational procedures, class size, support or aide provisions, time factors, family supports, behavioural concerns).

18. **Can you talk about some of your over-riding concerns (worries) regarding the student/s?**

(Examples of this might include meeting curriculum outcomes, future pathways, behavioural or well-being concerns.)

19. **What would you like to see happen for this student (in an ideal world)?**

20. **Are there any other matters that you would like to discuss that you believe we have not addressed yet?**

Thank you very much for your time, understanding and generosity when participating in this interview. Your contribution has been very helpful.

Appendix C Ethical Approval

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (TASMANIA) NETWORK
29 October 2012

Dr Tracey Muir Faculty of Education Locked Bag 1307
Student Researcher: Penelope Ludicke
Sent via email

Dear Dr Muir

Re: FULL ETHICS APPLICATION APPROVAL Ethics Ref: **H0012770 - Teaching the underachieving student in Year 7 and 8: How Teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges Identify and Support Underachieving Students in the Middle Years**

We are pleased to advise that the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee approved the above project on 25 October 2012.
This approval constitutes ethical clearance by the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. The decision and authority to commence the associated research may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance from other organisations or review by your research governance coordinator or Head of Department. It is your responsibility to find out if the approval of other bodies or authorities is required. It is recommended that the proposed research should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements.
Please note that this approval is for four years and is conditional upon receipt of an annual Progress Report. Ethics approval for this project will lapse if a Progress Report is not submitted.

The following conditions apply to this approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval.

1. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval, to ensure the project is conducted as approved by the Ethics Committee, and to notify the Committee if any investigators are added to, or cease involvement with, the project.

Complaints: If any complaints are received or ethical issues arise during the course of the project, investigators should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 03 6226 7479 or human.ethics@utas.edu.au.
A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Social Science Ethics Officer Private Bag 01 Hobart Tasmania 7001 Australia
Tel: (03) 6226 2763 Fax: (03) 6226 7148 Katherine.Shaw@utas.edu.au

2. Incidents or adverse effects: Investigators should notify the Ethics Committee immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

3. Amendments to Project: Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval is obtained from the Ethics Committee. Please submit an Amendment Form (available on our website) to notify the Ethics Committee of the proposed modifications.

4. Annual Report: Continued approval for this project is dependent on the submission of a Progress Report by the anniversary date of your approval. You will be sent a courtesy reminder closer to this date. **Failure to submit a Progress Report will mean that ethics approval for this project will lapse.**

5. Final Report: A Final Report and a copy of any published material arising from the project, either in full or abstract, must be provided at the end of the project.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Shaw Ethics Officer Tasmania Social Sciences HREC

Ethical Amendment Approval

Dr Tracey Muir Faculty of Education Locked Bag 1307
Sent via email

Dear Dr Muir
Re: APPROVAL FOR AMENDMENT TO CURRENT PROJECT Ethics Ref: **H0012770 - Teaching the underachieving student in Year 7 and 8: Identifying and supporting underachieving students in the middle years**

• Amendment to use a data set obtained from the researcher's place of employment, collected from approximately 200 Year 7 students who were participating in an exercise designed to assist them to focus on transitions and connections.

We are pleased to advise that the Chair of the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee approved the Amendment to the above project on 14 October 2014.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Shaw

Executive Officer Tasmania Social Sciences HREC

Appendix D Sample Recruitment Letter

Dear teacher,

I would like to invite you to participate in an online survey as part of the following study:

"Teaching the underachieving student in Year 7 and 8: How teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges identify and support underachieving students in the Middle Years".

The aim of this study is to identify and examine what it is that teachers of students in Year Seven and Eight do, when they ascertain that students in their classrooms are not achieving the expected learning outcomes for their year level or subject. The study will explore teacher beliefs and understandings about underachievement in the Middle Years, drawing attention to the status of the underachieving student in early adolescence, as well as to the practices that teachers engage in, while working within Tasmanian Catholic Education system as well as National parameters and guidelines.

All teachers employed within the Northern Tasmanian Secondary Colleges teaching years 7-12 are invited to complete the survey (accessible from the link below), which focuses on general perceptions of teachers regarding underachieving students in these year levels. Participation in the survey is voluntary. Permission to conduct this study has been obtained from the Principal of this College and the Faculty of Education, UTAS. Formal ethics approval has been obtained from the University of Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. Data from the survey will be subject to privacy and informed consent procedures.

Attached to this email is an Information Sheet that outlines the purposes and scope of the study, plus informed consent forms for current teachers of Year Seven and Eight students who, after completing the survey, indicate that they would be interested in further participation through interviews and class observations.

The survey link is available here:
http://utaseducation.us.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_b8E1qyeyH6NBFit

Thank you for your time

Student Researcher: Penelope Ludicke, Penelope.Ludicke@utas.edu.au

Appendix E Information & Privacy Statement Sample

Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 and 8: How teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges Identify and Support Underachieving Students in the Middle Years.

Information for participants

Invitation

I would like to invite you to participate in the research project "Teaching the underachieving student in Year 7 and 8: How teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Schools identify and support underachieving students in the Middle Years". This study is being conducted in partial fulfilment of a PhD for Penelope Ludicke under the supervision of Dr Tracey Muir and Associate Professor Karen Swabey.

The purpose of this study is to investigate what it is that teachers in Catholic Secondary Colleges do, when they ascertain that students in their classrooms are not achieving the expected learning outcomes for their year level or subject? What factors and characteristics do teachers consider when they identify underachievers and low achievers in their classrooms? What practices do they put in place to support underachieving students? Finally, who do they collaborate with during this process?

Thus, a major aim of this study is to explore teacher beliefs and understandings about classroom practice when working with underachieving students in Year 7 and 8. It aims to draw attention to the status of the underachieving student in early adolescence, as well as to the practices that Catholic Secondary School teachers engage with in the Middle Years, while working within system, state and National parameters and guidelines.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate in this study as a Catholic Secondary School teacher who teaches Year 7 and/or Year 8 students in a Northern Tasmanian 7-12 Catholic Secondary College.

An invitation to participate in an online survey was emailed to all teachers working in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges. From this survey and accompanying information, teachers of students in Year 7 and/or 8 have been invited to participate in case study interviews and observation visits.

Your involvement in this study is entirely voluntary. There will be no consequences if you decide not to participate. If you do participate, you may withdraw at any time. Participation will not affect, for example, your relationship with the University, the Catholic Education Office or the school which employs you.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in two interviews and a classroom observation visit-which includes a short follow-up discussion (either in person or by phone or email). There is also the possibility of a further follow-up interview for clarification purposes if required. You will be provided with a summary of the essential themes emerging from the data you have provided

and will be given the opportunity to provide a written comment regarding this summary if you wish. You will also have an opportunity to review and correct transcripts if you choose.
Interviews will be arranged at your institution in a private meeting room at your convenience. Both classroom visits and interviews will occur at a time that you request and identify is convenient. No interviews or visits will be made on an 'impromptu basis' without due notice and/or your consent.

Interviews and observations will be tape-recorded and transcribed with all identifying data removed from the transcriptions. Interviews may last from 25 minutes to 40 minutes, while the class observation visit will be from 45 to 50 minutes, as is a standard period in secondary school. A brief discussion or meeting, either in person or via phone or email will follow the classroom observation visit. The type of discussion will depend on your own circumstances and preferences. No photographs or video recordings will be made.
Examples of questions asked in the interview may include:

1 Do you have any underachieving students in your classroom?
2 How do you know when students are underachieving in your subject/classroom?
3 What sorts of steps do you put into place to support them?

Are there any possible benefits from participation in this study?

There are no tangible or specific benefits to you from participation in this study. However, you may find that your understanding of the study problem is enhanced by participation in the survey and/or case study participation. This understanding may be helpful to you as a practicing professional working with students in Year 7 and 8. Furthermore, knowledge from this study may benefit the broader community of educators and professionals, particularly those working with underachieving students in the Middle Years.

Are there any possible risks from participation in this study?

Possible risks from participation in this study may include the following: inconvenience, such as the inconvenience of filling in a form or giving up time to participate in research, or discomfort, which may include for example, the anxiety induced by an interview or observation visit. While it is most likely that any harm or risk involved would be due to inconvenience or possibly discomfort as outlined above, there may be the potential for interviews or classroom observations to result in anxiety or distress. If you do become distressed or anxious and wish further support, you may wish to discuss your concerns with colleagues, school leaders or to seek the support and/or counsel of your school's Human Resources Coordinator. You are also invited to contact the contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network using the contact details provided at the end of this sheet.

Alternatively, you may choose to register a concern with the Catholic Education Office, by contacting the Director, Dr Patricia Hindmarsh, using the contact details provided.

What if I change my mind during or after the study?

If you decide you do not want to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time. You do not have to provide an explanation. You may also withdraw any unprocessed data that you have contributed. Data that has already been processed will not be able to be returned,

however identifying information will have been removed from all processed data that remains with the study.

What will happen to the information when this study is over?

The data for this study will be kept in a locked filing cabinet within a secure location at the School of Education, UTAS, Launceston, for a period of five years after publication of the thesis. Digital data will be stored on cloud storage and accessed only by the researcher using a secure password. After this period data will be destroyed. Hardcopy data will be shredded, while all digital data will be deleted.

All data is confidential and will not be able to be accessed by anyone other than the research team.

How will the results of the study be published?

"This study forms part of the requirements for a PhD and, as such, findings will be presented through several forums for educational research". Papers from different aspects of the thesis may or may not be published in academic and professional educational journals both during the completion of the thesis and after.

A summary of key findings will be made accessible to participants through a website created for this purpose after publication of the thesis and all participants will receive a copy of the link to this website. No participant will be identifiable in the final report or in any resulting publications. A pseudonym will be used if a participant is referred to directly.

What if I have questions about this study?

If you have any further questions for this study you can contact the following people.

Student Researcher: Penelope Ludicke, Penelope.Ludicke@utas.edu.au or 63419988
Supervisor 1: Dr Tracey Muir, Tracey.Muir@utas.edu.au or 63243261
Supervisor 2: Associate Professor Karen Swabey, or 63243712

"This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study, please contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email human.ethics@utas.edu.au. The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. Please quote ethics reference number [H0012770]."

Director of Catholic Education: Catholic Education Office, Tasmania
Dr Patricia Hindmarsh, patricia.hindmarsh@catholic.tas.edu.au or 6210 888.

This information is provided for you to keep. Your consent to participate in this study is implied by your completion and submission of this survey. If you wish to participate in the case study interviews and observations, please complete the appropriate section of the survey, including supplying preferred contact details. You will also need to complete, sign and return a formal consent form.

Appendix F Consent Form

Teaching the underachieving student in Year 7 and 8: How teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges identify and support underachieving students in the Middle Years.

Consent Form for Case Study Participants (Interviews and Observations).

1. I agree to take part in the research study named above.
2. I have read and understood the Information Sheet for this study.
3. The nature and possible effects of the study have been explained to me.
4. I understand that the study involves me participating in an interview of approximately 35-50 minutes. The interview will be audio-taped and transcribed.
5. I understand that all research data will be securely stored on the School of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston premises for five years from the publication of the study results, and will then be destroyed.
6. Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
7. I understand that the researcher(s) will maintain confidentiality and that any information I supply to the researcher(s) will be used only for the purposes of the research.
8. I understand that the results of the study will be published so that I cannot be identified as a participant.
9. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without any effect.
   I understand that I will be able to withdraw any unprocessed data.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

Statement by Investigator

☐ I have explained the project and the implications of participation in it to this volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implications of participation.

If the Investigator has not had an opportunity to talk to participants prior to them participating, the following must be ticked.

☐ The participant has received the Information Sheet where my details have been provided so participants have had the opportunity to contact me prior to consenting to participate in this project.

Appendix G Sample Permission Letter

To the Principal,
XXXXX College,
XXXXXXX Rd,
XXXXXXX, 7000

Dear XXXXXXX,
I am writing to request permission to approach teachers within your school to conduct a research study on the following topic:

Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 & 8: How Teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges Identify and Support Underachieving Students in the Middle Years.

I am currently a research student with the University of Tasmania and am undertaking this study to fulfil the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy (Education).
The purpose of this study is to find out:

- In what ways do teachers working in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges identify underachieving students in Year 7 and 8?
- What practices do they put in place to support them?
- Who do they collaborate with during this process?

The study will explore teacher beliefs and understandings about the processes they engage with, drawing attention to the status of the underachieving student in early adolescence, as well as to the practices that teachers implement, while working within both the Tasmanian Catholic Education system and National parameters and guidelines.

The methodology used in this study will be a mixed methods study that is predominantly qualitative. Data will be collected from case studies formed from surveying, interviewing and observing teachers of Middle Years students working in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges. The study will formulate case studies using a purposeful sample of teachers teaching students in Year Seven and Eight.

Publication of research findings from the study will be through a doctoral thesis and other forums for the publication of Educational Research. Papers from different aspects of the thesis may or may not be published in academic and professional educational journals both during the completion of the thesis and after.
I would like permission to circulate an email, survey and further information to teachers employed in your school. The survey is an online survey developed through the University of Tasmania *Qualtrics* program. All teachers currently employed at your school will be invited to participate in the survey through the emailed expression of interest and invitation letter (see attached). Participation is entirely voluntary and confidential. Current teachers of Year 7 and 8 students will also be invited to participate in further case study interviews and observations. This invitation will be extended via the survey instrument.

Ethical permissions to conduct this study have been sought and granted through the University of Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The approval number for this permission is H0012770.
Attached to this letter are copies of the formal consent forms, information sheets, UTAS HREC permission letter, and email expression of interest and invitation letter. The letter includes a link to the survey.
If you grant formal consent for this study to be conducted as outlined above, could you please email consent to: Ms Penelope Ludicke, and forward the accompanying expression of interest letter, attached information and consent forms and survey links to teaching staff in your school.
Yours sincerely,

Student Researcher:
Penelope Ludicke, Penelope.Ludicke@utas.edu.au or 63419988

Supervisor 1:
Dr Tracey Muir, Tracey.Muir@utas.edu.au or 63243261

"This study has been approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have concerns or complaints about the conduct of this study, please contact the Executive Officer of the HREC (Tasmania) Network on (03) 6226 7479 or email human.ethics@utas.edu.au. The Executive Officer is the person nominated to receive complaints from research participants. Please quote ethics reference number H0012770.

TASMANIAN CATHOLIC education office

13 November 2012

Penny Ludicke
C/- St Patrick's College
PO Box 401
Prospect TAS 7250

Dear Penny,

I am writing in response to your email received 8 November 2012 seeking permission to invite the Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges to participate in your research project *Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 and 8: How Teachers in Northern Tasmanian Catholic Secondary Colleges Identify and Support Underachieving Students in Middle Years.*

I have read the information provided by you and, subsequently, I am happy to provide in principle approval. Please note, however, that it is up to the individual school to determine whether they wish to participate in the study.

Please do not hesitate to contact this office if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Dr Trish Hindmarsh
Director

th mp

The D'Arcy Centre PO Box 102 North Hobart 7002 Tel: 03 6210 8888 State Office & Regional Office: South
MacKillop Centre PO Box 160 Riverside 7250 Tel: 03 6327 1795 Regional Office: North
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Department of Education
EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE SERVICES

2/73 Murray Street, Hobart
GPO Box 169, Hobart, TAS 7001 Australia

Tasmania

File: 2013-35

28 January 2014

Ms Penelope Ludicke
9 Benjamin Street
TREVALLYN TAS 7250

Dear Ms Ludicke

Teaching the underachieving student in Year 7 and 8: identifying and supporting underachieving students in the middle years.

I have been advised by the Educational Performance Research Committee that the above research study adheres to the guidelines established and that there is no objection to the study proceeding.

Please note that you have been given permission to proceed at a general level and not at individual school level. You will need to seek permission from the principals of the schools involved in the study. Please note that the Department of Education does not condone the use of incentives in order to attract participation in a research project and requests that the offer of the voucher be withdrawn.

A copy of your final report should be forwarded to Educational Performance Services, Department of Education, GPO Box 169, Hobart, 7001 at your earliest convenience and within six months of the completion of the research phase.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Fiona Atkins on (03) 62337656

Yours sincerely

Katrina Beams, Assistant Director
(Educational Performance Services)

Appendix H Literacy and Numeracy Achievement for the Cohort

Class achievement for literacy and numeracy data for the cohort was measured by Progressive Achievement Testing (PAT), provided by the Australian Council for Academic Research (ACER, 2015). The testing included PAT R (reading comprehension) and PAT Maths (mathematics) tests, which were completed online, scored by ACER and normed against a larger Australian group of Year 7 students. Students were tested at the beginning of the year in February and then again in September. Data for the 7 core classes who completed the reflection sheet was available to use as a standardised reference from the September testing (ACER reference book and site). The data were collected from testing occurring just over 7 weeks after the wellbeing day and reflection activity. The PAT data for the 7 core classes who participated in the reflection activity was isolated from the PAT data collected for the entire cohort. The Progressive Achievement Testing data were reviewed to identify whether core classes appeared to be achieving within an average, lower than average or higher than average range compared to other Year 7 classes within Australian schools.

Table 1 shows the relationship between stanine and percentile rankings, which have been normed using results from a broad group of Australian Schools and students participating in the testing. The band in green indicates where mean achievement levels for the students participating in this study fit. Results for Reading Comprehension and Mathematics all fell within the average population distribution for Australian Schools in 2013.

Table 1

Normed stanine and percentile rankings

NORMATIVE DESCRIPTION OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	STANINE	CORRESPONDING PERCENTILE RANKING	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS
Very high	9	96 and above	4
High	8	89-96	7
Above average	7	77-89	12
High Average	6	60-77	17
Average	5	40-60	20
Low Average	4	23-40	17
Below Average	3	11-23	12
Low	2	4-11	7
Very low	1	0-4	4

Note. Table sourced from Acer (2015).

Appendix I Student Workshop Materials

Core Class Connections: P4

Year 7 students complete this component of the day in their core classes with their teacher. The themes are on acknowledging positive connections and exploring challenges.
Resources: Set of 60 cards (provided); students will need white paper to write on and their pencil cases. Reflection sheets for students-these need to be collected up and returned to Cass or Penny at the end of the lesson.

- Lay out the cards (with words and symbols) on the front desks, then invite students to come forward and select 2 cards each.

One card should represent a positive part of their experience as students at St Patrick's College. One card should represent something that they find is a personal challenge.

1. Once the students have selected 2 cards, they need to return to their seat and complete a Think/Pair/Share.
2. *Think (2-3 minutes-personal reflection) Pair (4-6 minutes-to share with one or two students nearby) Share (Whole class sharing-guided by teacher).*

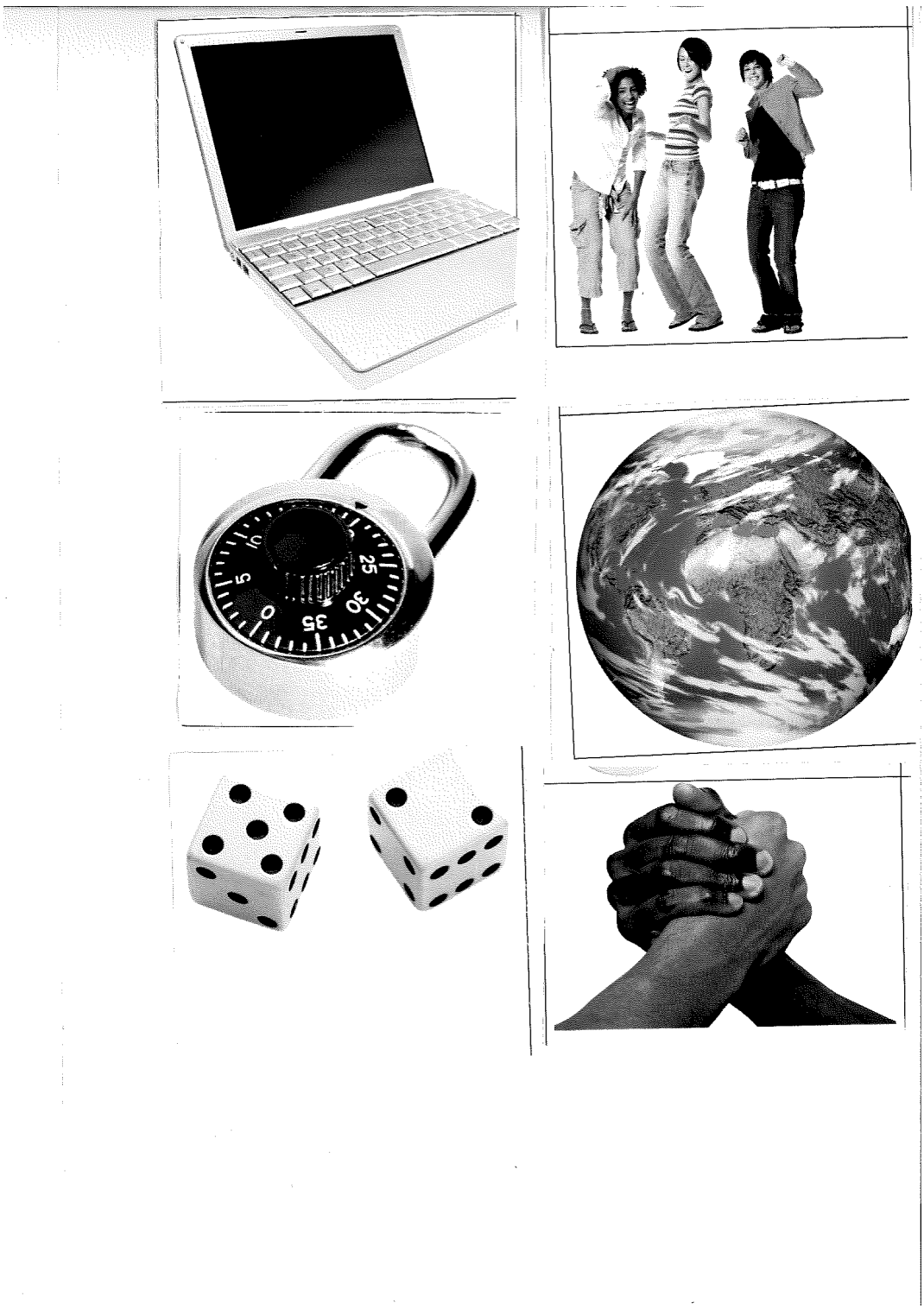
3. Create a list of shared positives and negatives on the whiteboard. Then ask students to raise hands if they also find each positive or negative applies to them. Keep a tally on this informal survey. (The purpose behind this activity is to allow students to acknowledge the positives and realise that many of the challenges are common to others.)

4. In pairs (or small groups) ask students to choose 2-3 challenges and brainstorm some coping strategies that might be useful to assist in managing these. Allow around 5-10 minutes for this task.

5. Share the group responses with the whole class and note on whiteboard.
You will probably need to scaffold this discussion with the students and perhaps connect some of their solutions with study strategies (homework issues) and relationship/coping/key people strategies (bullying and friendship concerns).

6. To conclude this activity, give the students the reflective handout to write on and complete on their own without assistance. (*The handout provides a scaffold that helps the students write up their personal responses to the concerns explored during this lesson. Please collect these sheets and return to* XXX or YYY.

7. If you have time-finish with a class game: sleeping lions, head's down thumbs up, silent ball, whole class Pictionary or similar.



Sample of 6 images (taken from set of 60 different images. Original images in colour-sample copy in black and white)

Appendix J Student Reflection Instrument

Year 7 Reflection sheet P: 4

(if you need more space, just turn over and use back of page)

One thing I worry about at school with my work is……

A challenge that I have is……

Two things I could do to help me with these challenges are……

1

2

Something that the school could do that would help me is……

First name: **Core Class:**

Appendix K Sample Table of Participant Data

Categories/descriptions	Themes/motifs/beliefs and values	Words-phrases-notes	Life world concepts & other
Teacher background and beliefs	Diversity of needs and aims All students can learn Target the learner Journey together	We need to try to teach (reach?) everyone. Recognition of learner diversity-enabling all in the class to achieve at an individual level. All learners can learn? Differentiate what the need is-functional literacy or getting to university Job of teacher to support the student to reach their goals-journey Need to know students as individuals Build up relationships-continuing relationships ESL background as a teacher-smaller classes allows for more developed relationships with teachers Teaching students for more than a year helps with the development of this and with learning who your students are "our job to support the individual student to get wherever they want to go"- (peer pressure then a factor?)	Go wherever they are going Journey
Significant factors	Student-centred model of teaching Relationships ongoing and over time and year levels Balance in home-school partnerships or relationships-need support from parents but not too much support Background factors and knowledge	Know your students individually-student at the centre Build up relationships-relationships very important to effective teaching-continuing relationships-ones that carry out over a long time Not restricted only to younger students-relevant across the year levels. Uniqueness of adolescent years-puberty a factor Parent (balancing out relationships-managing expectations) Knowing your students	Balance Relationships
Underachieving student-identifying factors		Formal identifications Students on IEPs (diagnosed learning barriers?) Students who underachieve in specific classes or with particular teachers-based on teacher expectation (what students can get away with) Low expectations versus high expectations can result in student underachievement for specific teachers/students	
Challenges or barriers to identification	Background factors-limited knowledge of student Knowledge of curriculum and experience can make a significant difference to a teacher and their class	Strong relationships and background knowledge (from teaching student over a specific period-knowing parents) and teachers who have time and resources all help prevent underachievement. Battling to cover the topic-lack of experience with particular subject or curriculum can impact on or impede a teacher's ability to recognise underachievement or to act on it.	Battling-energy Managing
Identifying factors	Mild behaviour avoidance strategies	Avoidance of task-general avoidance tactics and behaviours Rushing through work so it is done but not very well Calling out, chatting to their neighbour Needing to go to the toilet-avoiding work generally	Relationships-fitting in

	Peer pressure Fear of achievement or what it might mean	Background knowledge (can be ascertained from parents) Peer pressure mentioned again as a factor "she was trying to fit in with her friends and so she was trying to be like the other kids and then didn't want to show off the knowledge that she had". Parent collaboration with this.	
Strategies to assist	Structures Specialist teachers	Structures, seating plans Modification or adjustment of work Curriculum differentiation Breaking task into steps Scaffolding the learning Individualising or tailoring learning to match student needs. Teaching the vocabulary of the subject (literacy focus) Specialist teachers not always doing this	
Obstacles or barriers	Resources, time and structures	School structures particularly high schools Time tables-blocks of time- Space-moving and organisation Management of learning environment-ownership of the classroom "has a bigger impact on our teaching sometimes than I think we actually realise because you can only take to class what you can carry". US system for example allows teachers to differentiate and individualise curriculum more readily.	Time, space and resources
Collaboration	Colleagues with Resources and appropriate knowledge Interruptions to program for withdrawal reading Catching up the kids	Learning support personnel-this can be helpful but not always Colleague and subject teachers' coloration can be the most useful-colleagues have resources Can save time-allow time to be used more effectively in differentiation Backwards and forwards relationships-give and take Collaborative team teaching really effective Helps with organisation as well-managing time and resources TAs-not always available or there to help with specific classroom curriculum items. TAs tended to be used for withdrawal programs-can be a barrier to the flow of the lesson-not related to progress in specific subject-specific reading programs-limited choices in relationships with TAs and options with class	Balance-ebb and flow of mutually supportive relationships with colleagues and use of time and resources
Strategies & Markers of success	Positive feedback & home-school contact-reinforcement Need for specific goals	Improvement from where they were at to where they are now Providing students and their parents with progress updates Using the nuances of the National Curriculum to mark progress-even when the specific standard hasn't changed. Need to have goals-these might be set at the beginning of the term between student and teacher. Goals can be small or bigger. Target the student's needs-e.g. relate to organisation or resources-bringing pens to class. Interruptions to schooling and the curriculum seriously impact on goals as well though.	(movement along a line or continuum)

Barriers and supports	Block timetable Interruptions	Can work either way-effective for fewer interruptions but when interruptions occur can result in more time missed in a specific subject because of larger block lessons. Causes challenges for time and flow and the development of relationships. School structures (carnivals and other events at beginning of year impact on the relationships between students and teachers and this can have a pervasive and long standing impact (if subtle) Number of subjects a teacher might need to master can impact on their effective delivery of different subjects if they are overloaded. Less time to recognise underachievers and plan for a range of events and lessons. Can impact on 'bigger picture' of learning and the development of meaning-fracturing Resources	Interruptions to the time and flow of learning Fracturing
Fears and concerns	Parental deficit Low teacher expectations Students making decisions about their learning too earlier and it becomes too late	I worry about them falling through… People having too low expectations for students, especially students with complex background factors Having low expectations might mean that teachers elect not to differentiate or individualise the curriculum Setting the students up to fail-kids giving up Making decisions in Middle School that they are not achievers or effective learners and that this continues As avoidance factors and low achievement Kids in 7 and 8 don't have a good grasp of the long-term consequences and it becomes 'too late' Kids suffering because parents lack knowledge of schools and systems and don't advocate enough or support or push	Negative cycle of achievement and behaviour sets in and becomes entrenched.

Sample Teacher underachievement definition or descriptor:

Students who are not meeting the standard (standard individualised-based on individual appraisal of ability and background context/circumstances. E.g.: English as a Second Language standards used for EAL students). Or students with learning barriers who are not meeting IEP goals, students who are achieving passing grades but ones that might be much lower than their actual ability or innate knowledge. Background factors and knowledge of student can play a significant role in identification of such students.

Sample teacher signature statement:

You've got to know your students because if you don't know your students and where they are at and where they can go and what is going on in their life then you don't understand them and that has an impact on their learning.

I had the relationship, not so much with him but I had a relationship with that whole family, so when he would tell me, would say "Oh well, I can't do this, this and this", I would say "No, that is actually a lie because I know this…". And so, having that breadth of knowledge enables you to really strengthen that relationship and know what is going on.

I guess that is the difference between a Grade 7 and a Grade 8 by the end of the year. A Grade 8, by the end of the year, you can sit down and sort of have that more mature conversation and they can usually see that yes they have improved and that you have worked on them with their goals during the year. They can see it; whereas a Grade 7 in that same boat doesn't generally. Unless it is a very mature Grade 7, they generally can't see it and so it can make them more frustrated.

From: Penny Ludicke
HDR Candidate
Faculty of Education
University of Tasmania
Ethics Application Approval No: H0012770

7/01/2015

Dear Participant E,

Teaching the Underachieving Student in Year 7 and 8: Identifying and Supporting Underachieving Students in the Middle Years.

The purpose of this letter is to thank you for your participation in the research study (outlined above) and to provide you with a copy of a summary table of data obtained from your participation.

The data summary includes themes, key or 'signature' statements and information from your interview transcript. This data summarises your teaching experience and professional beliefs around the research topic and questions, as I have understood them to be.

As noted on the privacy statements and original permission letters, your data will remain anonymous and if statements, like the signature statements listed on the summary, are used within chapters within the final thesis, they will appear without reference to your name or workplace. Any reference made to an individual's data or use of a personal statement will include the pseudonym listed on your data summary.

Please check the details and make any corrections or additions you wish. If you do make changes, please return this document with any changes using the reply- paid envelope enclosed.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank you again for generously participating in this study and sharing two valuable resources, your time and professional expertise. I hope you will accept the "inspirational educators" fridge magnet, which is a very small token of thanks on my behalf. It seemed an appropriate tribute to your contribution towards and concern regarding the education of young adolescents.

Sincere regards,

Penny Ludicke